

2005

## The efficacy of writing course placement at an Iowa community college

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THE EFFICACY OF WRITING COURSE PLACEMENT  
AT AN IOWA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

A Dissertation

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

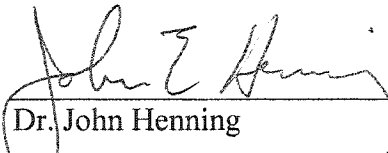
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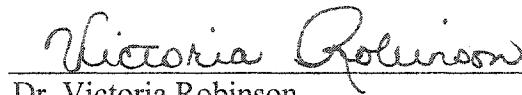
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May 2005

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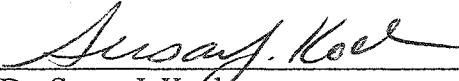
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THE EFFICACY OF WRITING COURSE PLACEMENT  
AT AN IOWA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

An Abstract of a Dissertation  
Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

Approved:

  
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May 2005

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the efficacy of writing course placement at an Iowa community college. The following questions were addressed:

1. What indicators, separately or in combination, resulted in an appropriate or inappropriate student writing placement? a. To what extent did the COMPASS test result in an appropriate placement? b. To what extent did the self-directed essay result in an appropriate placement? c. To what extent did a student's preference result in an appropriate placement?

This study was important to understand how the "directed self-placement" model, adapted from Royer and Gilles (1998, p. 1), impacted the institution's placement practices. The placement of courses was a critical component when beginning a student's program of study. In order to obtain a rich understanding of the phenomena, a mixed methodological design was used to analyze data including COMPASS test scores, essay content and ratings, student placement surveys, and faculty perceptions.

Placement data used to select a student's course indicated a single indicator (COMPASS, essay, or student preference) could not successfully predict an appropriate course placement for every student participating in the study. The content of the essays suggested students considered non-cognitive factors such as confidence, motivation, and work experiences when selecting courses.

The independent analysis indicated agreement among all three or any combination of two placement indicators should result in an appropriate course



placement. Approximately 91% of the students were recommended to select their courses with at least two of the three placement indicators in agreement; however, agreement among these indicators varied. Survey results indicated the majority of the students were satisfied or very satisfied with their course placement; 85.2% at 6 weeks and 89.1% at 15 weeks.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The open access philosophy of American community colleges has increased the use of standardized placement tests in the United States. Students were entering community colleges with diverse academic levels and experiences while college administrators were grasping at evaluation tools to determine the academic abilities of their prospective students. Standardized testing was the easiest and perhaps the quickest solution to accommodate students with diverse needs.

The use of placement testing to assist students in selecting courses was one service colleges implemented to assess the academic abilities of their students. The growth of placement testing to determine student eligibility to take courses in community colleges was also fueled when the state and federal government implemented policies to regulate the administration of placement tests and financial aid. The Department of Education, under section 484(d) of the Higher Education Act of 1965 regulates the Ability to Benefit (ATB) tests, allowed higher education institutions to select approved tests to be administered to students who have not completed a high school diploma or GED equivalency but who were seeking federal financial assistance (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The Iowa Department of Education, Chapter 21 (260C) states Iowa community colleges need to provide placement services that address the needs and expectations of students (Iowa Administrative Code, 2003). These policies have shaped the role of community colleges assessment across the country over the past few decades.



Prospective students are required to provide assessment records during the admissions process to provide evidence of their abilities to succeed in a collegiate environment. Often colleges require a standardized assessment such as the American College Test (ACT), Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), or Computerized Adaptive Placement Assessment and Support System (COMPASS) test in addition to reviewing a student's academic transcripts to determine acceptance. Four-year colleges and universities over the past decade also incorporated other assessments such as writing samples or essays to assist in the acceptance process. Upon acceptance or conditional acceptance to the college, students are placed into either standard level or remedial courses based on their educational assessment.

The placement of courses becomes a critical component in beginning one's program of study. Improper placement can result in negative consequences for the student and the institution. Students may achieve poor grades and be placed on academic probation in addition to the institution's continual battle with low retention rates.

Due to increasing accountability and legal issues, many college administrators and faculty are revisiting their academic policies and procedures to determine if specific standards need to be amended. Among these standards is the use of standardized testing as criteria for college admissions. This controversial issue began over 100 years ago in the United States and continues to resurface through political agendas (Zwick, 2002). Some experts believe standardized testing accurately measures academic achievement and allows for the comparison of students from varied educational backgrounds (ACT,

2002b; Beatty, Greenwood, & Linn, 1999). Others support standardized testing produces biased results for minorities and women (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Mann, 1997). To minimize conflict among stakeholders and attempt to avoid lawsuits, many four-year colleges and universities have implemented supplemental criteria to grant acceptance.

The notion of allowing students to have a “voice” in their course placement is a relatively new concept (Luna, 2003, p.377; Royer & Gilles, 1998). Colleges and universities that use mandatory or highly recommended placements typically do not have methods in place to allow students to express their viewpoints. The placement decisions are made at the time of admissions and students are expected to adhere to the policies. Very few students are waived from the recommended placement as students respect the expert decisions made within the institution. Faculty and administrators genuinely want to promote student success even though they are aware it is impossible to place all students with perfect accuracy using one assessment

Royer and Gilles (1998, p. 1) proposes using a new assessment referred to as “directed self-placement” in which students are allowed to place themselves into their writing courses. Students at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan were surveyed in 1995 to determine their perceptions of the writing course placement practices. Approximate 38% of the students believed they were not properly placed (Royer & Gilles, 1998). Grand Valley State University, like numerous other universities, uses a combination of their standardized test scores, high school grade point averages, and writing sample scores to place students into their writing courses.

Shortly following the survey findings, the English faculty decided to allow students to take responsibility for their course placement decisions. Students selected the writing course they felt best reflected their writing abilities. To guide the placement, students reviewed descriptive statements and characteristics about what type of students should be successful in each course. Students took ownership in their decisions and the college rarely received complaints (Royer & Gilles, 1998).

Luna (2003) incorporated elements of Royer and Gilles' "directed self-placement" model at Lyndon State College in Vermont. In addition to reviewing the descriptive statements and general characteristics, the students were administered a writing prompt that specifically asked them to justify their course placement decision. The English faculty reviewed the essays and ultimately made the final placement decision.

#### Institutional Setting

This study was conducted at a two-year public community college in the state of Iowa during the fall of 2004. Approximately 5300 students were enrolled in courses each semester; 60% of them were enrolled in the arts and sciences transfer programs while 40% were enrolled in technical programs. The average class size was 22 students. There were 281 faculty members; 115 full-time, 43 part-time, and 123 adjunct faculty employed by the College.

#### Conceptual Framework

In order to obtain a better understanding of what community college students perceive as effective course placement practices, one must conceptualize how

community college students construct knowledge and incorporate their diverse experiences. Many learning theories exist to explain elements of the learning process; however, few seem to incorporate the diverse experiences of community college students and learner-centered education. In addition, most literacy theories focus on reading, writing, speaking, and listening. While these areas have some relevancy to the topic, the current practices within most of the Iowa community colleges primarily focus on placing students using only their writing competencies. As a result, a blend of adult learning principles and constructivism will be synthesized to frame this complex phenomenon.

Adult Learning. Adult learning has attracted the attention of scholars since the 1920's (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2001). Merriam (2001) postulates there are two pillars of the adult learning theory: "andragogy and self-directed learning (p. 5)." Conceptualizing the foundation of adult learning is important as 40% of community college students are over the age of 25 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). "Andragogy" is based on five assumptions that describe the adult learner: "(1) has an independent self-concept and who can direct his or her own learning, (2) has accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that is a rich resource for learning, (3) has learning needs closely related to changing social roles, (4) is problem-centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge, and (5) is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors (Merriam, 2001, p. 5)."

Creating a learning community that takes into consideration the nature of students as defined above is fundamental to learning. The learning environment should

consist of using methods of instruction and assessment that are most effective to stimulate active learning for the student population. Houle (1996) states, “andragogy should involve learners in as many aspects of their education as possible and in the creation of a climate in which they can most fruitfully learn (p. 30).” Assessment should grow out of “privilege learning (Carbone & Daisley, 1998, p. 92).” “Directed self-placement” directly involves students in their educational process.

Constructivism. Constructivism is based on the notion that individuals construct knowledge and meaning through the interactions and analyses of their environment. Lev Vygotsky (1978) proposes that the learner controls the intellectual transformation by reconciling the instructional experience with prior knowledge. Self-reflection fosters the connection to previous experiences that allow for producing meaningful insights and abilities. Lev Vygotsky (1978) also suggests knowledge is constructed through social interactions in which learners share, construct, and reconstruct information. The teacher or facilitator guides the interaction through experiential learning to create meaningful exploration of a concept. The social interaction between the teachers and learners are a vital component in the process.

#### Statement of the Problem

Entry level placement tests have become an admissions requirement. These tests are used to sort students into developmental and college level courses in order to improve student success rates. Community colleges are given the ultimate authority to determine how to assess academic ability and place students into their courses. However, if a community college chooses to allow students who have not completed

high school or the equivalency to enter into their courses, approved standardized tests must be administered. Colleges must demonstrate a student's "ability to benefit" in college courses in order to award non-high school graduates financial aid dollars.

Despite the controversial issues about standardized testing over the past century, all 15 Iowa community colleges offer standardized tests as part of the admissions process. A few of the community colleges have chosen to offer supplemental assessments such as a faculty created exam or a writing sample to assist in course placement. However, some of these colleges offer the supplemental assessment after the completion of the admissions process and course registration.

Not all faculty members are confident a standardized test can effectively measure a student's writing ability. Their skepticism can be validated by the reliability of the tests. Most reliability research on standardized tests is well below a correlation of 1.0 due to various non-cognitive student factors that skew the results.

In addition, little research has been conducted on faculty and student perceptions of the assessment practices used in Iowa community colleges. Incorporating a writing sample using the "directed self-placement" model identified by Luna (2003, p. 377) and Royer and Gilles (1998) would allow students to have a "voice" in their course placement as well as identify their writing abilities. It is expected that the student perceptions will assist faculty, advisors, and counselors with course selection, which will ultimately impact student success in the classroom.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the efficacy of writing course placement practices at an Iowa community college. The following questions were addressed in this study:

1. What indicators, separately or in combination, resulted in an appropriate or inappropriate student writing placement?
  - a. To what extent did the COMPASS test result in an appropriate placement?
  - b. To what extent did the self-directed essay result in an appropriate placement?
  - c. To what extent did a student's preference result in an appropriate placement?

#### Significance of the Problem

There is limited research on the efficacy of writing course placement practices in Iowa community colleges. It is intended the results of this study will be used by the college's administrators, faculty, and staff to determine ways to improve the course placement services. In addition, the proposed writing course placement model may have application for other community colleges in a similar situation. Future college researchers could also compare the differences between student and faculty perceptions of course placement in the areas of reading and math.

#### Methodology

The design of this study incorporated a mixed methodology. Data were collected from students using a self-directed essay, the COMPASS writing test, and two surveys. The writing prompt was created by a multi-disciplinary team using the model presented by Royer and Gilles (1998) and Luna (2003) as the foundation. This prompt

was designed to allow students to have a “voice” in their writing course placement and to assist in identifying writing ability. The COMPASS writing test, a standardized test, was also used to identify a student’s writing ability for course placement. Surveys were administered to the students at approximately 6 weeks and again at 15 weeks into the semester to determine their satisfaction with their writing course placement.

Data were collected from faculty at the completion of the writing course during final exam week. The faculty members participated in a semi-structured interview to express their perceptions of the writing course placement practices and whether they believed specific students were appropriately placed into their courses. In addition, faculty members were asked if there were any recommended changes to further improve the writing course placement process.

#### Assumptions

The study was based on the following assumptions:

1. The instruments utilized were valid and reliable for the purpose of this study.
2. Participants completed the writing samples, surveys, and interview questions with accurate responses.
3. Participants were not coerced by the administrative staff to participate.

#### Delimitations

The study was delimited by:

1. Iowa community college students and faculty.
2. The use of the self-report instruments and questions.



### Limitations

The study was limited by:

1. The honesty of the subjects' responses.
2. The reliability and validity of the instruments.
3. The writing curriculum may not be representative of writing curriculum at other community colleges.
4. The selected Iowa community college may not be representative of other community colleges.
5. The respondents who participated in the research study.

### Definitions of Terms

Ability to Benefit Tests -- Standardized tests approved under the Federal Register to allow students to enroll in college courses without the completion of a high school diploma or equivalency (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Adult Education -- Part-time educational opportunities for adult students including but not limited to: basic education programs, high school completion, and continuing education.

Appropriate Placement -- faculty perception that the student had adequate writing skills consistent with the demands of the course.

Computerized Adaptive Placement Assessment and Support System (COMPASS) -- An adaptive computerized assessment to measure students' academic abilities in reading, writing, and mathematics (COMPASS, 2000).

Constructivism -- A theory based on the notion that individuals construct knowledge and meaning through the interactions and analyses of their environment (Vygotsky, 1978).

Course Placement-- The practice of recommending or requiring students to begin courses based on test or assessment scores.

Cut Scores-- A specific range of scores that allow students to enroll in a particular course.

Decision Zone -- A few points above or below the cut score range on a standardized test.

Displaced Workers -- Workers displaced from their jobs due to company closings, down sizing, or insufficient work.

First-Generational Student -- Student whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree.

Inappropriate Placement -- faculty perception that the students had inadequate or advanced writing skills inconsistent with the demands of the course.

Learner-Centered Education - "The perspective that couples a focus on individual learners with a focus on learning (McCombs & Whisler, 1997, p. 9)."

Level of Confidence -- Measurement of self-assurance based on the meta-cognitive awareness of one's skills.

Non-Traditional Student -- College student who is over the age of 24 years and typically has different life circumstances in comparison to a traditional student.

Off-Topic Responses -- Focus of the essay is not related to the topic of the writing prompt.

Open Access -- Provide equal educational access to all students regardless of their academic ability and social status.

Perception -- Process by which an individual detects and understands information from the external world (Collins English Dictionary, 2000).

Remedial Education -- Developmental or success courses to allow under-prepared students the opportunity to achieve the level to enroll in standard college courses.

Self-Efficacy -- "Power or capacity to produce a desired effect (Dictionary.com, 2004. p.1)."

Self-Evaluation -- "Student's reflection on and evaluation of his or her learning, in writing, seen as an integral part of the learning experience in educational settings (Kusnic & Finley, 1993, p. 8)."

Self-directed Placement Student -- Student who completed the self-directed writing sample for course placement.

Standardized Test -- Administering and scoring a test under uniform conditions (Zwick, 2002). Candidates can be given various forms of the test that are intended to yield comparable results.

Student Motivation -- A psychological trait that drives a student to reach desired goals.

Traditional Student -- A student who attends college directly or within a few years after high school.

Value Involvement -- Expression of appreciation for being included in the course placement decision.

Vocational and Technical Training -- Training programs to prepare students for immediate employment in their specified vocation.

Work Experiences -- Knowledge and skills acquired from performing tasks as an employee.

### Summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate the efficacy of the writing course placement practices in an Iowa community college. Since limited research on the efficacy of using the proposed model exists, it was intended the results of this study would be used by the college's administrators, faculty, and staff to further improve the course placement services. In addition, the proposed writing course placement model might have application for other community colleges in similar situations.

The literature review, presented in Chapter 2, examines the history and philosophy of American community colleges, the community college student, college admissions and course placement, standardized tests, writing assessments and development, developmental education, and the theoretical framework of adult learning theory and constructivism. Each of these areas has unique characteristics that were incorporated in the foundation of this study.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to investigate the efficacy of the writing course placement practices at an Iowa community college. This review of literature provides a context for understanding the issues related to this study by addressing the following areas: (a) history and philosophy of American community colleges; (b) community college student; (c) college admissions and course placement; (d) select standardized tests and definition, history, and controversial issues; (e) writing sample assessments and prompt development; (f) developmental education; (g) theoretical framework and (h) summary.

#### American Community College

##### History and Philosophy

American community colleges have evolved from simple beginnings to modern complex organizations. Since their origination over 100 years ago, community colleges have continually been confronted with societal changes. In 1901, William Rainey Harper initiated the junior college movement as a means to extend high school and to transition students into a vocation (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). More students were graduating from secondary schools and the field of science was placing higher demands on society. Junior colleges were portrayed as “blending in the uses of vocational and collegiate education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 33).” Joliet Junior College, the first public junior college, was established in Illinois. By 1919, there were 170 junior

colleges throughout the United States (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). A century later in 1999, there were over 1200 community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Junior colleges increased in numbers and services in response to needs and mandates arising from the Great Depression, the GI Bill, and the Truman Commission (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). In October 1929 at the onset of the Great Depression, the economy was unstable and people feared not having adequate jobs to support their families. Higher education to develop skills was a response to stimulate prosperity and rebuild the economy.

The expansion of higher education was fueled in 1944 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, commonly referred to as the GI Bill (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Millions of men were granted the opportunity for upward mobility through higher education. College and universities expanded enrollment as a means to promote the democratic values to those Americans who served for their country. Institutions of higher learning determined their standards to recruit and select students. The vast majority of the veterans attended community colleges that promoted open access (Lehmann, 2000). Subsequently, in 1947, President Truman and his commission re-evaluated the role of higher education. They established a network of public community colleges to provide equal educational opportunity and access to all individuals. The Truman Report addressed several societal problems in which educational institutions were expected to assist in resolving.

Higher education was perceived as a vehicle for upward mobility. In the 1960's, a national network of community colleges developed and many junior colleges

redefined their mission to begin offering a variety of services to a diverse student population. Comprehensive community colleges began offering adult education, vocational and technical training, college transfer programs, remedial education, and community services (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

#### Community College Student

Community colleges attract a variety of students to their campuses. This is partially due to their convenient locations, comprehensive services, low cost of tuition, and flexible scheduling. Community colleges offer educational services that fit everyone's lifestyle. Students can enroll part-time or full-time and they can attend classes during the day or during the evening. Academically under-prepared students can take developmental education courses until they gain the knowledge and skills to necessary for standard level courses. Community colleges actively recruit non-traditional students when there is a shortage of traditional age students (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). This adds to the diversity of the community college campuses.

The student population at community colleges is gradually becoming much more diverse. According to Levine and Cureton (1998), approximately 20% of the all college students can be classified as traditional students. Community colleges are serving students who are single parents, displaced workers, first-generational, college graduates, English as Second Language (ESL) students (Van Der Linden, 2002). The average student enrolled in a community college is 29 years old (American Association of Community Colleges, 2000). Approximately 40% of all community college students enroll in at least one remedial course to assist in their preparation for standard college

courses (Lewis & Farris, 1996; Shults, 2000). This diversity is challenging community college faculty and administrators to seek programs and services that address a wide range of skill levels.

There are over 10 million students enrolled in community colleges, which represents 44% of all the undergraduate students in the United States (American Association of Community Colleges, 2000). The average student enrolled nation-wide in a community college is 29 years old. According to Phillippe and Patton (1999), approximately 32% of community college students nation-wide are 30 years of age or older. In addition, 30% of community college students are classified as minority students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2000). In the state of Iowa, there are over 78,000 students enrolled in community colleges, which has surpassed the total enrollment of students in the public Board of Regents universities (Jerousek, 2003).

The diverse student population at community colleges offers students, faculty, and staff the advantage of being able to connect and appreciate diversity; however, it also poses unique challenges to stimulate learning and foster these connections. Adult learners who are more self-directed may set higher expectations in the classroom than those students who are not as engaged. In addition to the academic diversity of students in Iowa, there are considerably less minority students in comparison with other regions of the United States. Recruitment of minority students in Iowa is also a challenge to community colleges. Several Iowa Community Colleges are increasing their recruitment strategies to attract more minority students. In order to retain minority



students, the community colleges need to foster a true sense of community and be receptive to their needs. Assisting with course placement and fostering a learner-centered education provides this sense of community (Roueche & Roueche, 1999).

### College Admissions and Course Placement

In the late 1990's, over 93% of the qualified applicants at four-year college and universities were accepted based on either their SAT or ACT scores (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). The validity of utilizing standardized testing for the purpose of selecting students for admissions was based on the degree to which the test scores predicted future grades. Community colleges tend to use four-year institution policies as a guide when establishing their own placement and academic policies.

The selection of students was almost always defined by the college and its mission. Colleges have been classified as Liberal, Traditional, Selective, and Highly Selective (ACT, 2002b). Colleges and universities typically used test score ranges to accept students based on their test scores. Liberal colleges typically admit students with scores between a 13-19 on the ACT. Community colleges that use an "open door" policy can be classified in this category (Roueche & Roueche, 1993, p. 53). Traditional schools, such as state universities, generally accept students with a score of 20-23. Selective private colleges and universities seek students with test between the 24-27 range, while highly selective schools recruit students with ACT scores above a 28 (ACT, 2002b).

Admissions offices regulate the institutions' philosophy for recruiting students. The college can be an "open door" and allow equal access to all students or serve as a

“revolving door (Roueche & Roueche, 1993, p. 53).” The policies set within the college will determine its philosophy. Colleges that provide accurate placement and academic support services to assist a diverse level of students are considered to be “open door” institutions. In contrast, colleges that do not offer support services tend to have lower retention rates as under-prepared students come and go; “a revolving door.”

The evaluation of effective placement testing requires an understanding of its intended purpose. Placement testing is intended to offer courses to all students at various levels. Support services and developmental education programs allow under-prepared students the opportunity to be successful in college. However, admissions tests or academic achievement tests are designed to predict student success not necessarily to place students into their courses. The admissions standards will select and sort students by determining which students will be accepted into specific programs. Admissions and placement tests in community colleges are frequently used interchangeably. Selective academic programs set required admission policies that must be satisfied prior to acceptance. The faculty members who govern these programs will allow students to develop their skills by taking remedial education courses until they are fully accepted.

Approximately 40-50% of the students who attend liberal colleges and universities often require developmental education (ACT, 2002b; Lewis & Farris, 1996; Roueche & Roueche, 1999; Shults, 2000). These institutions use course placement services and establish cut scores to assist advisors, counselors, and faculty to place students into remedial or standard level courses based on students’ assessment results.

Each college chooses the type(s) of assessment tools to assist in registration. At present 14 of the 15 Iowa Community Colleges have chosen to use ACT and COMPASS scores to aid in this process.

Some of the Iowa community colleges are beginning to administer writing samples to serve as a supplemental measure to the standardized tests. The standardized test format was developed for specific purposes. The ACT English component offers a valid, yet convenient and inexpensive alternative to measure editing ability through the use of multiple choice questions. Students who can edit existing essays were expected to be better writers (ACT, 1997).

Essay tests that require composition provide “diagnostic power” to determine areas of improvement through a direct measure (ACT, 1997, p. 1). When comparing ACT English scores to essay tests from eight different courses among five schools, as expected, the students who scored high on either test earned the highest grades (ACT, 1997). The relationship between the ACT English scores and course grades (.30) was stronger than the essay scores (.14) (ACT, 1997). The use of ACT English scores for course placement was 66% accurate while the essay scores were 62% (ACT, 1997). However, not all research supports this notion. Although multiple choice writing tests do correlate with actual writing tests for Caucasian students who use Standard English, the correlations were lower for other Non-Caucasian students (White, 1995).

Admissions offices and the policies within their departments regulate the selection of students. Every college or university will set its policies in order to select students who will benefit from attending their institution. Colleges and universities that

use course placement offer a beneficial service for their students. Standardized tests are an alternative to select and place students. However, standardized tests have been scrutinized for decades and colleges must decide if supplemental assessments are necessary.

In support of using academic achievement as a measure to admit students into college, the state of Texas adopted a policy in 1996 to allow students who graduate in the top 10% of their class to be automatically accepted into the state public universities. After the University of Texas lost a reverse discrimination case in 1992, the entire state revisited its admissions and affirmative action policies. *Hopwood vs. the State of Texas* raised several issues one of which was the use of test scores (Fernandez, 1996). Some colleges and universities were relying too heavily on test scores to admit students. The University of Texas modified its admissions criteria to accept 10% of their undergraduate students based solely on high school grades. This “10 percent solution” placed value on achievement instead of test scores and aided in combating potential controversial issues (Sacks, 1999, p. 293). In addition, this policy was expected to increase or maintain the diversity on college campuses (Cavanagh, 2003; Sandham, 1997).

#### Directed Self-Placement

A handful of “directed self-placement (DSP)” studies have been conducted over the past few years. The studies were conducted in different types of colleges; community college, public and private universities, and small private liberal arts colleges. The research settings varied in size, location, and student population. Each

researcher adapted the model presented by Royer & Gilles (1998) to fit their institutional setting and writing program pedagogy.

One of the “directed self-placement” studies was conducted at John Tyler Community College (JTCC) in Virginia. While the sample size was too small to prove the efficacy of DSP within a community college setting, the findings were significant enough for the College’s administrators to offer this placement option to their students’ who placed into the decision zone (Tompkins, 2003). According to Tompkins (2003), the decision zone was a gray area where it was difficult to select a student’s course. Most standardized tests, such as the COMPASS test, did a fairly good job placing students into their courses if they score really high or low on the test (Tompkins, 2003). The challenge of using standardized tests was aligning them with the college’s curriculum and placing students in developmental courses. At JTCC students were recommended to take the DSP writing sample if they scored in the decision zone.

The JTCC study consisted of 65 students; 24% of the students who completed the COMPASS writing test. The writing sample was given to the students after they took their COMPASS test. A folder was given to each student describing the process. Within the folder there were a course placement chart, writing course descriptions, self-inventory checklist, and three sample writing course syllabi and assignments (Tompkins, 2003).

The success rate of the study was determined by the final grade achieved by each student. Approximately 63% of the students who enrolled in the college level writing course, despite their lower COMPASS test scores, earned a grade B or higher.

In comparison to the other students who scored at the college level on their COMPASS test, 49% of them also achieved a grade B or higher (Tompkins, 2003). Several of the DSP students (27%) withdrew from their college level writing course which was a much higher rate than all of the other students (16%). Since JTCC has a large part-time student population, it would be worth investigating whether the students who withdrew from the course were only enrolled in that course or if they withdrew from all of their courses. Knowing this information might suggest a student withdrew from the college for other reasons besides being under-prepared for the college level writing course.

The students were asked, at the end of the semester, their reasons for selecting the college level writing course. Approximately 35% of these students cited different rationales in comparison to the study conducted at Grand Valley State University (Tompkins, 2003). Among the comments were their desire to be successful, “parental coercion”, counselor recommendation, and to satisfy their degree requirements (Tompkins, 2003, p. 201).

A second DSP study was conducted at Belmont University, a private comprehensive liberal arts university in Nashville, Tennessee. Belmont University enrolled approximately 4,000 undergraduate and graduate students each year (Belmont University, 2004). An typical student would have achieved a SAT test score of 1140 or an ACT test score of 24.5 and a 3.43 high school GPA of 3.43 (Belmont University, 2004).

Students enrolled in two sections of English 101, a standard level writing course, were piloted using the DSP at the beginning of their writing course. Since these

students completed both the 90 minute essay exam prior to registration and the DSP writing sample they were able to provide valuable student input about the process. The students felt empowered and informed the faculty that students would not self-select English 90, a developmental course (Printer & Sims, 2003).

The faculty chose to delete English 90 and implemented DSP the following semester (Printer & Sims, 2003). In order to safeguard the possibility of a student being under-prepared for writing courses, an admissions committee, which included an English Faculty member, would request these under-prepared students complete an additional writing course in order to be fully accepted into the college.

The DSP process occurred during student orientation. Students were asked to complete an adapted version of Royer and Gilles (1998) questionnaire and review examples of college level assignments from each English course. Students were then asked to compose an essay based on a particular reading excerpt (i.e. Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*). Students were given 30 minutes to read the paragraph and respond to the writing prompt. After 30 minutes the proctor would ask the students to read their essay to themselves. Following this, the proctor read a typical response to allow student's to make comparisons. Students evaluated their own essay using specific criteria (Printer & Sims, 2003, p. 121). Faculty addressed any questions about the courses and allowed the students to self-select their English course. Approximately 10% of the students preferred to have the faculty read their essays and advise them on their placement recommendation at the end of each session. Students were referred to their advisors for course registration (Printer & Sims, 2003).

A third study was conducted at Kutztown University in Kutztown, Pennsylvania. Kutztown, a state affiliated university, had an approximate enrollment of 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Each year the university admitted approximately 1500 students. Kutztown was as an open access institution that typically enrolled 40% first generational students with very few students from the top 15% of their high school graduating class (Kutztown University, 2004; Chernekoff, 2003). Many students were not confident with their academic skills and were raised in low to middle class families (Chernekoff, 2003).

The pilot began in the summer of 1999 orientation session and continued for three consecutive summers. The old placement practices frustrated most students, faculty, and administrators (Chernekoff, 2003). The DSP model promoted active participation from faculty and students as everyone had an invested interest. There were fewer complaints from students, parents, and faculty. The Acting Dean reported that there were no complaints from students and parents the subsequent fall semester (Chernekoff, 2003).

A few faculty were skeptical as they felt basic writers would not be equipped to make good decisions about their course placement. However, the student grades in the courses did not dramatically change during this period and students' were selecting developmental writing courses (Chernekoff, 2003). The fear of students failing their composition courses or not enrolling in developing education was not a reality. Over 12% of the students chose to enroll in the developmental education course in 1999 (Chernekoff, 2003). Students became an integral stakeholder in the process and in most



cases, students wanted to prove that they made the right decision. The students, who were motivated to succeed at the higher level, also were aware they had access to the writing center.

Between 120 and 180 students attended a 45 minute orientation session. Students were asked to complete an anonymous inventory, similar to the checklist by Royer and Gilles (1998), and write responses about their reading and writing experiences. This method made students think more about their skill level to aid in their decision making. A “customer satisfaction” survey was given and 95% of the students believed they selected an appropriate placement (Cherneckoff, 2003, p.142). Of the remaining 5%, most of these students indicated they should have selected a higher level English course (Cherneckoff, 2003). The English faculty expected the administration to adopt this placement practice based on the findings of this pilot study.

A fourth study was conducted at DePauw University in central Indiana. DePauw is a small liberal arts university with a faculty to student ratio of 12:1 (Cornell & Newton, 2003). College recruiters use more selective admissions policies as approximately 97% of their students graduate from the top half of their high school class (Cornell & Newton, 2003). The university enrolls about 15% at-risk students. At-risk students are classified as scoring below a 530 on the verbal SAT test or scoring below a 22 on the ACT English test.

The faculty adopted DSP in 1995 when the college shifted away from mandatory placement. Their greatest concern was putting their at-risk population at a disadvantage. Each spring semester, a letter was sent to these at-risk students to explain

the placement process and the two English courses: College Writing I and College Writing II. Enclosed with the letter was a questionnaire similar to the checklist created by Royer and Gilles (1998). The students were asked to self-select their English class and complete their registration form.

Data were collected on 435 at-risk students over the three-year period. The students who selected College Writing I had a mean SAT Verbal score of 473 (N=183) with a range of 320-550. The mean ACT English score was a 19.4 (N=103) with a range of 11-26 (Cornell & Newton, 2003). The students who selected College Writing II had a mean SAT Verbal score of 494 (N=199) with a range of 340-710. The mean ACT English score was a 20.4 (N=123) with a range of 14-28 (Cornell & Newton, 2003). Considering the range of test scores for each group, it was difficult to predict which writing course a student would select.

Subgroups were analyzed to determine if gender, ethnicity, or college generation could assist in course prediction. Female students (53.9%) and those of European descent (53.6%) were more apt to select College Writing II. First generational (52.2%) and African American students (58.1%) were more apt to enroll in College Writing I (Cornell & Newton, 2003). However, the significance was slight to say the least.

The course achievement data indicated that very few students failed their writing courses. Of the students who selected College Writing I, only 5 out of 209 achieved a failing grade (Cornell & Newton, 2003). Of the students who enrolled in College Writing I, 4 out of 226 failed the course (Cornell & Newton, 2003). The students were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their course placement decision. There

were 128 individuals that answered the entire questionnaire for College Writing I. The results indicated 58% of the students agreed with their course selection, 64% felt prepared for the course, 72% recommended continuing the course for elective credit, and 2.3% suggested removing the course (Cornell & Newton, 2003). There were 56 respondents that completed the College Writing II questionnaire. The results indicated 88% agreed with their placement decision, 89% felt well prepared for the course and 75% felt they would not have benefited from a lower level course (Cornell & Newton, 2003).

The fifth study was conducted at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC). The University enrolls approximately 21,500 students annually. Over 65% of the incoming freshmen were among the top half of their high school graduating class with an average 21.5 composite ACT score.

In fall 1998, the English faculty decided to move away from using ACT test scores to DSP for course placement. Prior to 1998, placement in English 101 and 101 Restricted (R) was based on ACT scores. While the learning objectives were identical in each course, English 101R had more experienced faculty, a class limit of fifteen students, and the students were prepared to be mainstreamed in their next English course. Students who achieved above a score of 19 were allowed to schedule for English 101. Students who scored below a 19 were given a timed writing test by the English department. The students who scored really low were enrolled in English 101R. Although it was rarely used, faculty members for either course were given the option of assigning a progress grade (PR). Instead of being given a failing grade, a

student that regularly attended class and put forth effort on the assignments could be given a PR grade that did not affect one's grade point average.

Neither the writing nor ACT test predicted college success for SIUC students (Blakesley, Harvey, & Reynolds, 2003). The students who were efficacious were more apt to be successful in their courses (Blakesley et al., 2003).

Since there were a significant percentage of under-prepared students (10-15%), numerous students failing their English courses, and ACT as a sole measure could not predict the majority of the student's placement, the faculty moved toward DSP (Blakesley et al., 2003). Students were given the opportunity to select between two options, English 100/101 Stretch Program or English 101. The Stretch Program was adapted from Arizona State University and allowed students to take their course with the same professor in consecutive semesters (Blakesley et al., 2003). Students were asked to reflect upon their academic preparation, review course descriptions, and register for their selected course.

During the first week of their course, the faculty administered a diagnostic essay to serve as a safeguard to protect inappropriately placed students. The writing program administrators (WPA) occasionally made alternative course recommendations if they perceived the student to be academically at-risk for their upper level courses. Approximately 10% of the students seemed to place themselves too high (Blakesley et al., 2003). The students who selected the recommended alternate course were successful. Students who preferred not to change their courses based on the recommendations from the WPA's were asked to work with the writing center tutors.

The students who did not follow their placement recommendations had a 50% higher rate of failure (Blakesley et al., 2003).

Some of the key findings from this study to improve self-efficacy were as follows: The students who completed English 100 had a 9% higher success rate than those in English 101. By spring 1999, the retention rates in the English department increased by 59 students (11%) as student enrolled in their subsequent English course. The success rate for English 102 increased by 3.5% for the students who began their course sequence in English 100 (Blakesley et al., 2003).

The students were administered a satisfaction survey at the start and at the end of their course. Ninety-three percent of the students who were informed about DSP, “highly or moderately valued their right to choose” which course to take (Blakesley et al., 2003, p. 222). The precourse survey was completed by 2,025 students. Of which 48% heard about DSP. The majority of these students (93%) felt the advisors and print materials were helpful in their decision (Blakesley et al., 2003). Twenty-one percent of the students chose to enroll in English 100. Ninety-seven percent of all the students felt confident with their placement decision at the start of the semester. By the end of the semester, 84% of the students enrolled in English 100 felt “somewhat or very confident” about their decision (Blakesley et al., 2003, p. 222). For the students who enrolled in English 101, 97% of the students still felt “somewhat or very confident” at the end of the semester. However, 20% of these students did not pass the course (Blakesley et al., 2003).

### Benefits and Drawbacks

There are several benefits of implementing the DSP process (Royer & Gilles, 2003; Luna, 2003). First of all, students receive an explanation and the purpose of placement tests. Typically students complete a standardized test and an advisor or testing specialist provides a basic interpretation of the course placement recommendations. The students accept the test recommendations and schedule for their courses. DSP involves a more in-depth explanation of the rationale of the process. It acquires knowledge about students' abilities through the diagnostic assessment and it incorporates this knowledge into the final placement recommendations.

Secondly, students are fully involved in the process and have a "voice" in the course placement decision (Luna, 2003, p.377). Students can be given a writing prompt that asks them to review the college's detailed writing course descriptions, reflect upon their writing abilities, and write an essay defending their course selection or position (Luna, 2003).

There are a variety of placement assessments that can be incorporated into the course selection process depending on the institution, student population, and curriculum (Royer & Gilles, 2003). Advisors, counselors, and faculty could discuss with students other factors that may impede or enhance their learning. Non-cognitive measures such as student motivation, student use of academic support services, and student grade expectations could be considered in determining their readiness to enter into specific courses especially if the student falls in a decision zone. The "directed

self-placement” process can provide some insight on various student readiness factors as students defend their course selection.

Thirdly, the writing faculty communicates either directly or through correspondence their expectations of the course. The process changes the nature of the student interaction with staff and faculty (Royer & Gilles, 2003). Faculty become more involved in the placement process. The use of a self-inventory checklist, detailed course descriptions, and sample syllabi are shared with the students prior to registration.

Lastly, the placement process promotes self-assessment and responsibility. Students must reflect upon their own writing abilities and determine their strengths and areas of improvement. The process asks “students to learn from the past to make decisions about their future (Blakesley 2003, p. 46).” Depending on the institution’s placement policies, some institutions give their students the opportunity to choose their own writing course while other institutions are more reserved.

While DSP offers numerous benefits there are also a couple of potential drawbacks that need to be considered before implementing this placement method. First, DSP requires a strong institutional commitment from key stakeholders. The administration, faculty, and testing professionals must financially and genuinely support the initiative. The process is more time and resource intensive in comparison to standardized testing; especially if computer based testing is used (Royer & Gilles, 2003). DSP requires more direct contact with students. In addition, there is a cost to evaluate the essays and regulate the process. Second, depending on the institution, a variation of the model may need to be used to supplement any state or federal

regulations that are mandated for specific students who need to show “ability to benefit.”

### Standardized Tests

The existing literature in the area of standardized testing dates back to the early 1900's. Thousands of prediction and course placement studies have been conducted; however, an universal agreement has not been derived from the results (Zwick, 2002). Each study has its own unique qualities, which makes it difficult to generalize to other populations and circumstances. Most recently, the literature has focused on the latest developments with computerized delivery methods. As a result, the following review of literature will represent aspects of standardized testing and course placement within the past century.

### Definition

Standardized testing is defined as administering and scoring a test under uniform conditions (Zwick, 2002). Candidates are given various forms of the test that are intended to yield comparable results.

### History

Standardized tests were first conducted in the United States for the civil service to select qualified candidates for specialized military positions in World War I (Beatty et al., 1999; Zwick, 2002). The increase of testing occurred due to the urgency for trained individuals during World War II. Utilizing standardized tests for college admissions steadily increased since their development in the 20th century, as society



was changing with an emergence of social problems. The movement to use standardized tests seemed justified as a means to sort students.

Colleges and universities were confronted by an increasingly diverse student population that was educated with varied secondary curriculum, grading standards, and course content. College administrators implemented standardized testing as a way to bring more order to admissions. The National Research Council in 1982 states that educators were on “a search for order in a nation undergoing rapid industrialization and urbanization and a search for ability in the sprawling, heterogeneous society (Wigdor and Garner, 1982, p. 81).”

Another development that influenced the use of standardized tests was the automatic scoring designed by well-established test companies. Standardized testing became an efficient system to generate reliable comparative data at a relatively low cost. The data was readily available and easy to summarize (Bond, 1995).

Many colleges sought a need to use testing as a means to select students who would be successful in their preparatory programs. Prior to World War II, the largest testing company, Educational Testing Services (ETS), introduced the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), renamed the Scholastic Achievement Test in 1994, as a college admissions assessment (Mau, 2001). Due to the increasing demand during the late 1950's, the American College Test (ACT) was created to compete as an undergraduate admissions test. In the late 1990's over 93% of the qualified applicants at four-year college and universities were accepted based on either their SAT or ACT scores (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998).

The SAT was designed to measure mathematical and verbal ability to provide a standard way for elite college and universities to measure a student's ability to do college-level work (Wightman & Jaeger, 1998). The ACT program was not intended to be as competitive as the SAT. High school students who completed specific college preparatory courses would be prepared to take the ACT. Those students who completed the necessary curriculum in English, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Natural Sciences were expected to be admitted into colleges located predominately in the Midwestern states. In addition to assisting with college admissions, the ACT assessment was designed for the purpose of advising and course placement. Over the years, colleges and universities began using the SAT and ACT assessments independent of their geographical location. Either test was useful as a single criterion when making admissions decisions in addition to predicting student success in college. However, the ACT continues to be supported "by high schools in counseling, evaluation studies, accreditation documentation and public relations, by state and national agencies for financial aid, loans, and scholarship decisions, and other uses; and by colleges for placement and recruitment, as well as admissions decisions (Beatty et al., 1999, p. 6)."

In the spring of 2005, the SAT and ACT tests included an optional writing test. Students decided whether they needed to take this portion of the exam for the college or university they anticipated submitting an admissions application. Student enrolling in colleges and universities in the state of California are required to complete the writing test. The College Board was heavily influenced to add a diagnostic writing component when President Richard C. Atkinson from the University of California system

announced they considered dropping the SAT from their admissions requirements (Hoover, 2002). President Atkinson proposed the creation of the College's own writing placement test to replace the SAT if the College Board did not revamp their exam (Hoover, 2002). In addition to the writing section, the SAT included more advanced mathematics and reading questions. It is intended these revisions will align closer to the high school curriculum and more accurately predict a student's ability to be successful in college (Hoover, 2002).

In response to the revised SAT test, ACT began offering a similar writing test to complement the existing English test. The ACT staff has always considered themselves as being responsive to postsecondary institutions. After surveying colleges and universities nation-wide, ACT reported one-third of them already incorporated a direct or diagnostic writing assessment; another one-third were content with the ACT assessment; and the final one-third expressed an interest in the creation of a new writing test (ACT, 2003). The ACT writing test is a curriculum based test designed to measure a student's writing proficiency and achievement.

#### Controversial Issues

The criticisms of using standardized tests have surfaced consistently since the late 1970's. The tests provoked discussions about cultural bias, college admissions tests inappropriately driving secondary curriculum, misuse of the results, and the added pressure of teaching the content on the test (Shifflett, Phibbs, & Sage 1997). Some states implemented regulations to govern the use of predictive validity of test scores. In California, community colleges were required to submit predictive measures and course

prerequisites to their state officials (Armstrong, 2000). The use of multiple placement measures was also mandated in the state of California as correlations between test scores and course grades typically indicated a weak relationship (Armstrong, 2000).

Fairness and the validity of standardized testing have become known repeatedly over the past few decades. Many four-year colleges and universities are listening to their stakeholders by using standardized tests and supplemental assessment tools for selecting their student population. The debate stems from the validity of the tests to measure what they were intended to measure and the reliability of the tests for use with individuals of diverse backgrounds.

There were various factors that have led to the controversy of using standardized testing to predict success (course grades). The grading practices among faculty have indicated up to 15-20% variance among course grades (Armstrong, 2000). This variance directly affected the validity of some correlational research that uses test scores to predict course grades. In addition, the writing tests were perceived by some English faculty as unreliable (White, 1995). The use of multiple-choice language tests distorted the teaching of writing (White, 1995).

The gap between test scores within specific student populations sparked the most controversy and warranted further research. Scores between black and white students differ significantly, however some researchers support that black student scores have risen at a faster rate than white students since 1960 (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Lucas, 1998). Although it should be noted that African American students graduating in 2001 achieved an average ACT composite score of 16.9 and Caucasian students

scored a 21.8. The average SAT I score for African American students was a verbal score of 433 and a mathematical score of 426. In comparison, Caucasian students averaged a 529 verbal score and a 531 mathematical score. In essence, Caucasian students scored over 100 points higher on the SAT I reasoning test (Zwick, 2002). Typically African American scores were 75% below Caucasians (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). This statistic implies that the standard deviation and disbursement of scores was normal and there were some African American students who scored higher than Caucasians. According to White (1998), the SAT had a standard error of measurement of approximately thirty points on the verbal section and thirty-five points on the mathematics section.

According to White (1995; 1998), minority students perform lower on multiple-choice tests in comparison to an essay format. Caucasian students tend to perform comparable results on both assessments. The sample consisted of 10,719 students who completed the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE) and a writing sample in 1977 at California State University. Of those who identified their ethnicity (7,300), there were over 1,600 minority students. The essay scores indicated a relatively normal distribution; however, the multiple choice test represented skewed data. Approximately 11% of the Black students' writing sample scores were at the bottom of the total distribution. Faculty supported the belief of standardized test bias; however, several administrative professionals interpreted that the essays were not reliable due to invalid ratings (White 1995; 1998).

Gender bias has also been detected in standardized testing. Male test candidates have consistently scored at the minimum 40 points higher over the last 30 years on the SAT (Mann, 1997; Mau, 2002; Ramist, Lewis, & McCamley-Jenkins, 1994; Zwick 2002). In 1996, the average female test candidate scored 995 while her male counterpart averaged 1,034 (Mann, 1997). In 1994, the spread was larger as the average female scored a 1,034 while the average male scored a 1,098 on the SAT (Ramist et al., 1994). When investigating the high school grades point from this group, the female students earned a higher grade point average (GPA) in comparison to the male students who took the SAT in 1994. The female students averaged a GPA of 3.44 while the male students averaged a 3.37 GPA (Ramist et al., 1994). The high school grade point averages suggested the females in this study were slightly above their counterparts; however the SAT test scores were at the minimum 40 points lower. On the average, female students scored lower on the ACT mathematical, science reasoning test, and the overall composite score (Zwick, 2002).

Jencks and Phillips (1998) propose that there are three types of racial bias in testing: (a) labeling bias, (2) content bias, and (3) methodological bias. Labeling bias refers to the extent the test measures one variable, but actually measures something else. Aptitude and intelligence tests are intended to measure an innate characteristic. However, innate intelligence in children can be influenced up to 66% by external conditions in one's environment (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Content bias is similar to labeling bias as the test measures something else, but it is due to the writing of the test questions. Some test questions are written to intentionally or unintentionally favor

specific groups of people. Methodological bias is the extent that the test measures data using a technique that actually underestimates the ability of one group in comparison to others.

Tests that claim to measure intelligence have the same concerns as measuring aptitude. The SAT was created as such a test to determine the mathematical and verbal aptitude of high school students. One study conducted by Vars and Bowen (1998) determined that on the average, students with a combined SAT score of 1289 earned B+ grades in college, while students with a SAT of 1,000 earned B grades at the same institution. Is the slight difference in grades predicted by the test score gap?

Standardized tests such as the ACT and SAT have been under the microscope for over a century. While there are numerous advantages to standardized tests, colleges and universities need to understand their intended purpose, validity, and reliability as they can misrepresent student abilities if not utilized as recommended.

### American College Test (ACT)

The American College Test, better known as the ACT assessment, was designed in 1959 by E.F. Lindquist, a University of Iowa statistician as a tool to provide consistent and reliable information to college and universities about a prospective student's competencies in particular content areas. The reliability measures of the ACT have been estimated between a .84 and a .91 across 15 versions (ACT, 2002c). The test performance of students was directly related to their high school curriculum and achievement (ACT, 2002a). If high school students complete the core curriculum consisting of 4 years of English, 3 or more years of math (algebra and above), social

sciences, and natural sciences, they are expected to be prepared for the ACT test and college.

The ACT test measures achievements in the areas of English, Mathematics, Reading, and Science. The English measures “understanding of the conventions of standard written English and the role of rhetoric (ACT, 2002b, p. 2).” Students answer 75 questions about five passages within 45 minutes. The Mathematics test consists of questions that cover reasoning ability. Students are expected to solve 60 problems in 60 minutes using basic formulas and calculations. The Reading test measures reading comprehension through deriving “meaning by referring to what is explicitly stated and reasoning to determine implicit meaning (ACT, 2002b, p. 2).” Students are asked to complete 40 questions within 35 minutes. The final test of natural sciences also consists of 40 questions in 35 minutes, but it measures “interpretation, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, and problem-solving skills required in the natural sciences (ACT, 2002b, p. 2).” The items are presented using one of three designs: data representation, research summaries, and conflicting viewpoints (ACT, 2002b). Each subject is individually scored using the range 1-36. In addition, each test candidate receives a composite score using the sub-scores from the subject areas to calculate one score within the same range. Most Iowa community colleges will place their students into entry level courses if the student scores a 19 in each subject area.

In order to stay abreast of the curriculum within the American schools, colleges, and universities, ACT conducts a National Curriculum Study to aid in the development of future test items every 3 years (ACT, 2002b). Each year test items are developed by



ACT professionals and then tested by actual ACT candidates in the June national testing sessions.

ACT is committed to provide fair testing for all students and takes pride in monitoring the progress. The ACT test results are a compilation of knowledge gained from previous studies. The test questions are based on the curriculum that attempts to remain free of bias. However, this becomes a difficult task. When reviewing the ACT data there continues to be some variance between genders and ethnic groups. The exact cause of this difference is varied based on numerous social, environmental, and genetic inequities such as a quality education, socioeconomic status, and academic support. The average composite score for the Class of 2002 for males was a 20.9 and for females a 20.7 (ACT, 2002b). The ethnic breakdown of composite scores for this class follows: Caucasians 21.7; Asian Americans 21.6; Puerto Rican/Hispanic 18.8; American Indian/Alaskans 18.6; Mexican American 18.2 and African American students 16.8. These scores reflect some differences among specific groups. "Research recently conducted by ACT suggests that urban Hispanic and African American high school students don't always get the information they need, when they need it, to adequately prepare for college (ACT, 2002b, p. 5)." Sixty-three percent of the Caucasian students in this study completed the recommended core high school curriculum (ACT, 2002b).

ACT scores and first-year college grade point averages have typically indicated on the average .4 correlation (Noble, 1991; Zwick, 2002). Occasionally this correlation was slightly higher than using high school grades to predict college success (Zwick, 2002). ACT research supports the use of multiple variables to base predictions. ACT

conducted a study to investigate the relationships between ACT scores, high school course work, and college grades among thousands of students within a three-year period (Noble, 1991). The data was collected and stored in the Prediction Research Services files. The colleges participating in the study were primarily public four-year institutions located in the Rocky Mountain and Mid-West regions of the United States. The results indicated that across the subject areas and grade levels, there was a higher cross validation results (.39) than predictions using average grades (.33) and ACT scores (.26) (Noble, 1991).

There is evidence that the ACT test can predict the success of entering college students. However, ACT recommends using this test as well as its computerized COMPASS test as a supplemental measure to admit college students.

#### Computer-Adaptive Placement Assessment and Support System

ACT testing professionals developed the Computer-Adaptive Placement and Support System (COMPASS) for post secondary institutions to test student abilities in reading, writing, and mathematics. This comprehensive system provided expanded support to assist advisors, counselors, and faculty with academic advising, course placement, and retention issues. The assessments were computerized, adaptive to one's skill level, and are not timed.

COMPASS Version 3.0 was released in 2000 after extensive development. The initial field study consisted of collecting data from two-year and four-year colleges and universities in the fall and winter of 1998-1999. The data set consisted of 17,401 students; 14,012 were from two-year colleges and 3,364 students were from four-year

colleges and universities. The majority of the students identified themselves by the following ethnic groups: Caucasian (64%), African American (14 %), Mexican American (4%) and Asian American (4 %). The population had approximately 10% more females and 55% of the sample were under the age of 20 (COMPASS, 2000). The mean test scores for the two-year students in this study were reported as follows: 59.7 writing score with a standard deviation of 28, 76.4 reading score with a standard deviation of 16.8, 43.5 pre-algebra score with a standard deviation of 20.6, and 34.6 algebra score with a standard deviation of 19.1 (COMPASS, 2000).

The scale score of 1-99 was set to aid in interpreting the COMPASS test results (COMPASS, 2000). These scores were identified as percentages of items in the item pool and the student's response. Each item was calculated based on the level of difficulty and the probability of guessing correctly (COMPASS, 2000). The mathematics test was scaled to include pre-algebra through trigonometry. Prior to maximizing a skill level in mathematics, the computer program moves the student into the next level. A math score of 99 should only occur when the test was routed to the final skill level, trigonometry (COMPASS, 2000). Through the collective effort of faculty, peer institutions, and ACT consultants, post-secondary institutions set their own cut-scores to use for course placement.

The reliability of the assessment varied between a .89 -.91 depending on the subject and the test length (COMPASS, 2000). Test administrators had the option of selecting the length of time: standard, extended, or maximum. As the length of the test increased, the reliability increased.

The test items were reviewed using “internal, external, soundness, and sensitivity reviews groups (COMPASS, 2000, p. 117).” After an ACT writer submitted the test questions, the internal procedures were to require other staff members to review the items for fairness, content accuracy, and quality. Several external consultants were asked to review the COMPASS items for “soundness and sensitivity.” “Sensitivity” review groups consisted of five members representing African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans, Native Americans, and women (COMPASS, 2000).

Many community colleges have relied on the COMPASS test as a vehicle to assess students’ academic abilities. This standardized test was fairly reliable, convenient, and inexpensive. Community colleges were investigating other alternatives to supplement standardized multiple choice tests in order to increase the accuracy of course placement and satisfaction. Another alternative to standardized testing to assess writing ability was to administer a writing assessment.

#### Writing Sample Assessments

Colleges and universities that required a writing sample as an admissions requirement had the opportunity to evaluate a student’s ability to write and succeed in a collegiate environment. Other colleges and universities used a writing sample or essay as a means to solely assist in course placement. The writing sample can be administered prior to acceptance into the college or on the first day of the student’s writing course. Incorporating a writing sample in the admissions process had several advantages. First and foremost, it supported the standardized writing test score to increase the accuracy of course placement. Second, students sought trusting

relationships within the college to guide them through their collegiate experience. If students completed a standardized writing test at the time of admissions and then registered for their writing course based on the test scores, they expected proper placement in their course. On the first day of their writing course, if the faculty administered a writing sample for course placement and recommended a different writing course, the student would feel a false sense of security. Students who received conflicting information would rethink the advice that they received from advisors, faculty, and staff. A way to aid in the retention of students was to connect them with their environment through the relationships they develop on campus. Therefore, it is extremely important to building this trusting relationship early on.

Writing samples could be used to identify course placement as a primary or a supplemental measure. Expository essays were a viable alternative to assess a student's writing ability. Gronlund, (2004) stated "When students plan their writing, try to express themselves, examine their own and other student's writing, they are engaging in constructive processes that research has shown to lead to cognitive growth (p.307)." An essay prompt that required a student to reflect upon their personal experiences and formulate a descriptive response could be completed by most students (White, 1995). To be used as valid measures, the samples should be scrutinized using specific criteria and evaluated by a minimum of two faculty members to determine a rating score. If the rating scores were similar among the faculty, the course recommendation should be assigned based on institutional guidelines. The use of supplemental assessments was

supported by test companies and researchers (ACT 2002c; Beatty et al., 1999; Zwick, 2002).

According to the National Center for the Education Statistics (1998), approximately 75% of colleges and universities offered remedial writing courses to assist students in developing their grammatical, organization, and style proficiencies. Developmental writing courses offered opportunities for some students to obtain specific instruction to allow them to be successful in future courses. However, if a student was placed into such a course and it was not necessary, it could result in detrimental results such as students having a change of heart about attending college as they perceived their abilities as not being college appropriate. Or, if the student completed the course with relative ease, it provided a false reality for future courses.

A study was conducted at Miami-Dade Community College to determine if a writing sample would improve the accuracy of their course placement. Eighty percent of their prospective students completed the Computerized Placement Test (CPT) as a tool to assess writing ability (Rich, 1993). The placement of students using the CPT scores were approximately 85% accurate (Rich, 1993). Consistently for 5 years, the CPT scores indicated 42% ( $n = 5,921$ ) of the students were below the standard level writing courses. To investigate the effectiveness of their placement test, the faculty created three separate writing tests based on the type of remedial course to use as an independent measure for placement. Students were required to complete the essay during their required orientation session beginning the winter term. The courses for this study were identified as ENC0002, ENC0020, and ENC1100. The results indicated the

overall accuracy rate was over 80% (Rich, 1993). The individual course placement accuracy was 82.3%, 87.8%, and 83.3% respectively. Students who were perceived to be placed higher constituted 10% for ENC0020 and ENC1100. ENC0002 received 6.9% scoring into a higher level course. The results suggested that course placement accuracy did not improve based on the use of a writing sample as an independent measure (Rich, 1993).

Another study was conducted by Knudson at California State University (CSU). Knudson investigated the accuracy of CSU's writing instruction to assist high school students and university personnel by (a) analyzing student writing competencies that contributed to successful completion of an entrance examination, (b) to design curriculum and instruction to assist with the writing exam, and (c) assessing the quality of instruction (Knudson, 1998, p. 13).

The sample consisted of approximately 100 high school students who were planning to enroll in four-year colleges and universities. The students were given specific writing prompts at the onset of the study in addition to several times throughout the study. After 5-weeks of instruction, the essays were evaluated on the issue, position, support, microlevel and macrolevel skills. The interrater reliability using Pearson Correlation Coefficients for the following criterion were: issue (.80), position (.82), support (.85), microlevel (.21), and macrolevel (.21) with scores within one point from each other (Knudson, 1998, p. 17).

The raters used a 4-point scale for the first three criteria and a 6-point scale for microlevel and macrolevel skills. The mean for the five components suggested students

had some grammatical errors, but it was not significant enough to interfere with the overall results. The mean scores and standard deviation (SD) follows: issue mean 7.4 with a SD of 1.5, position mean 7.4 with a SD of 1.6, support mean 7.1 with a SD of 1.7, microlevel mean 5.5 with a SD of 1.0, and macrolevel mean 5.6 with a SD of .992. The students who successfully passed the test could take a position and defend it as opposed to the students who were not successful passing the test.

The intervention to assist with improving writing ability consisted of a total of 9.5 days of instruction in summary writing, synthesis writing, and argumentative-expository writing (Knudson, 1998). Interrater reliability varied between .68 to 1.0 for the essay scores (Knudson, 1998). Three separate t-tests were conducted to control for variance. The results suggested there was a significant increase in the post-test score after the instruction for various levels; however, the instruction in summarization was the most significant for the position, support, microlevel, and macrolevel skills. Argumentative writing predominately improved the criteria of issue with some significance with position, support, and microlevel. Synthesis instruction improved student's writing competencies in macrolevel, microlevel, and support. Selective institutions such as University of California set high admissions standards and expect proficient writing skills demonstrated through the ability to pass a writing examination prior to entrance (Knudson, 1998).

#### Prompt Development

Developing a writing prompt was critical as its the basis for collecting specific information about student abilities. Writing prompts should be clear, valid, reliable, and



hold one's interest (White, 1998). Students should be able to clearly define the topic of the writing prompt. The prompt would be a valid measure if students with strong writing abilities scored higher than those with limited skills. The range of scores should be dispersed and not regress toward the mean. The reliability of the essay was determined through the scoring process. Raters that expressed agreement in scoring an essay would represent a higher reliability. Finally, the writing prompt should entice students and encourage expression.

The time limit to compose an essay should be realistic and based on the expected outcomes. Forty-five minutes tended to be the standard time to organize and write a multi-paragraph essay (White, 1998). Typically, 10 minutes could be used to outline or conceptualize the ideas if the students preferred that style. The remaining time was used to compose and proof the content. Re-writing drafts were not necessary or recommended within this time frame. A word of caution, if someone recommended one particular approach to writing the essay, that recommendation could block creative students (White, 1998). Other students might have limited writing experiences and strategy development skills that could also hinder their ability to compose the essay. Using an expository essay posed little concerns as most students had experiences to reflect upon and share.

There were several essay types used to support a specific purpose (White, 1998). Among these include: expository, descriptive, and persuasive (argumentative). According to White (1998), expository essays analyzed personal experiences and knowledge to support the prompt topic. Descriptive essays were expressive in nature.

The purpose of this type was to allow students to describe personal experiences. Persuasive essay prompts were intended to influence or convince an audience by comparing and contrasting ideas to defend a particular situation (White, 1998).

There are a variety of ways to evaluate writing samples. Gronlund (2004) suggested using four or six categories to holistically score writing samples to avoid regressing toward the mean score. Galbato & Markus (1995) research suggested using a holistic approach over individual faculty ratings. Individual faculty ratings allowed faculty to use their own knowledge to evaluate a student's learning, while a holistic approach required multiple faculty to consistently evaluate writing samples using established criteria or rubrics. White (1998, p. 208) also suggested using a holistic approach to scoring essays. Using a six-point scale, the reader or rater initially scored the essay into the upper or lower halves, as signified by a score of 5 or 2, using the evaluative criteria and "anchor" essays (White, 1998, p. 208). Anchor essays illustrate an example of each score. Following the initial sort, the readers then assigned a final rating based on the following criteria (White, 1998, p. 298-99):

Score of 6: Superior

- Addressed the question fully and explored the issues thoughtfully
- Showed substantial depth, fullness, and complexity of thought
- Demonstrated clear, focused, unified, and coherent organization
- Was fully developed and detailed

- Evidenced superior control of diction, syntactic variety, and transitions; may have a few minor flaws

Score of 5: Strong

- Clearly addressed the question and explored the issues
- Showed some depth and complexity of thought
- Was effectively organized
- Was well developed with supporting detail
- Demonstrated control of dictation, syntactic variety, and transition; may have a few flaws

Score of 4: Competent

- Adequately addressed the question and explored the issues
- Showed clarity of thought but may lack complexity
- Was organized
- Was adequately developed, with some detail
- Demonstrates competent writing; may have some flaws

Score of 3: Weak

- May distort or neglect parts of the question
- May be simplistic or stereotyped in thought
- May demonstrate problems in organization
- May have generalizations without supporting detail or detail without generalizations; may be underdeveloped
- May show patterns of flaws in language, syntax, or mechanics

Score of 2: Inadequate

- Will demonstrate serious inadequacy in one of more of the areas specified for the 3 paper

Score of 1: Incompetent

- Failed in attempt to discuss the topic
- May be deliberately off-topic
- Was so incompletely developed as to suggest or demonstrate incompetence
- Was wholly incompetent mechanically

A “chief reader” was usually the program director and was responsible for guiding the rating sessions (White, 1998, p. 299). He or she assisted in clarifying the differences between the essays and resolved any issues that transpire. The “chief reader” monitored fatigue and built in breaks as needed.

As with any assessment, there were validity and reliability limits. Holistic scoring had face validity as it was a “direct measure of writing” (White, 1998, p. 283). Direct measures of writing or real writing typically have more validity than multiple-choice exams even though the product was usually in a draft format. Essays that were confined to a specific time frame, such as 45 minutes, do not incorporate the entire writing process. However, the raters must realize the limit imposed and its purpose. The reliability of using a holistic scale was based on consistent rating and testing conditions. The trained raters accurately evaluated the essays as the variations within the testing environment effect the final product.

Galbato and Markus (1995) conducted a study at Broward Community College that investigated if there were placement differences between the writing course placement decisions using standardized tests (ACT, SAT, ASSET) in comparison to using writing sample scores. The researchers also used two different evaluation tools to rate the writing samples (individual faculty ratings and holistic scores). The sample consisted of 307 students who were enrolled in forty-four sections of English courses. The students were placed into their courses (ENC 1101 Composition; LIN 1670 English Grammar; ENC 0020 Fundamentals of Composition) based on their test scores. Within the first week of classes, the students were given two topics to compose an essay within 60 minutes.

Comparisons were made utilizing the Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed ranks statistical test. Of the test score comparisons, the SAT was the only test that indicated a significant difference ( $Z=3.9101$ ,  $p=.0001$ ) when compared to the writing samples. The English faculty placed more students in a higher level course than what the SAT indicated (Galbato & Markus, 1995). Overall, the faculty placement decisions were similar in at least two-thirds of the standardized test score comparisons (Galbato & Markus, 1995). However, using the holistic approach to score the writing samples, the standardized test scores produced less matches. The ASSET test, a test developed by ACT, matched less than half of the time (46.3%), the SAT matched slightly higher (51.1%), and the ACT was statistically significant but not much higher (56.8%) (Galbato & Markus, 1995).

The individual faculty ratings and holistic scores were compared as well. Slightly less than half (49.8%) of the course recommendations were equivalent (Galbato & Markus, 1995). Of those that did not produce a match, 49 students (31.8%) who were evaluated using the holistic approach were placed into a higher level course, while the remaining students were placed in a lower level course. The grades of the students were monitored for each course. The overall results suggested the holistic approach might be a slightly better indicator of success than the individual faculty ratings (Galbato & Markus, 1995).

Writing samples, if properly written and evaluated, provided a diagnostic tool for advisors, counselors, and faculty to use to assist students to be placed into either remedial or standard level writing courses. If a student was recommended or mandated to enroll into developmental education, he would take at least one extra course and could be delayed from starting his program of study. Colleges and universities invested and continually reviewed their developmental programs to ensure they truly prepared students for standard level courses.

#### Developmental Education

Developmental education programs exist at most American colleges and universities to assist students who were under-prepared to begin their collegiate studies. Over 90% of colleges and universities offered such programs to provide opportunities for all students to obtain a collegiate education (Shults, 1998). Students who were not prepared for college courses were placed into remedial or success courses. Students were allowed to schedule for standard college courses in these subjects after

satisfactorily completing remediation. These success courses often extended one's program of study as the courses were classified as non-credit, but without remediation it was perceived students would not be successful in college courses.

Since the release of the Truman Commission report in 1944, developmental education programs have flourished (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). These programs were further developed with the intent to provide educational access and allow all students the opportunity to be successful. According to Boylan & Bonham (1992), the majority of students who completed developmental courses were successful in their programs. However, the completion rates range from 34 – 93% of all students who attempted remediation (Roueche & Roueche, 1999).

One study, conducted at a mid-western community college, investigated the relationship between students who participated in their recommended developmental writing course and those who chose not to enroll in the course (Crews & Aragon, 2004). Using an ex post facto design over a three-year period, the study revealed that students who completed the developmental writing course during their first semester achieved a higher cumulative grade point average ( $M=3.08$ ,  $SD\ 1.13$ ) than the non-participants ( $M=2.28$ ,  $SD\ 1.62$ ). A t-test was calculated to determine the difference between the cumulative grade point averages,  $t(481.144) = 7.13$ ;  $p = .01$ . Students who enrolled in the developmental writing course the next subsequent semester, some students after academic failure of a composition course, showed negative statistical significance. Students who chose not to enroll into the developmental writing course had a higher cumulative grade point average ( $M=2.51$ ,  $SD=1.60$ ) than the participants ( $M=1.68$ ,

SD=1.51),  $t(283) = -4.00$ ,  $p=.01$  at the end of the three-year period. After the completion of ENG 101, the students who enrolled during their developmental writing course in their first semester achieved a higher mean grade ( $M=3.15$ ,  $SD=1.51$ ) than those who did not enroll in the recommended developmental course ( $M=2.73$ ,  $SD=1.63$ ),  $t(279) = 2.23$ ,  $p=.03$ . The ENG 101 grades for students who chose to take the developmental writing course a subsequent semester were not significantly different than those who did not take the course (Crews & Aragon, 2004).

Another similar study was conducted at Okaloosa-Walton Community College in Florida. This study investigated the effectiveness of the College's mandatory placement writing program (Hay-Southward & Clay, 2004). The Florida College Placement Test (FCPT), created by College Board, was a multiple choice test to determine a student's ability in "sentence logic, coordination and subordination, and recognition of complete sentences (Hay-Southward & Clay, 2004, p. 40)."

Four groups of students were compared to determine if there was a relationship between composition grades and FCPT scores. In addition, specific measures of effectiveness were analyzed between groups 1 and 4. Group 1 ( $N=58$ ) consisted of students who passed College Prep English II, a developmental writing course, and immediately enrolled into their composition course. Group 2 ( $N=48$ ) also consisted of students who passed the developmental writing course, but chose to enroll into their composition course a subsequent semester. Group 3 ( $N=29$ ) consisted of students who failed the developmental writing course. Group 4 ( $N=794$ ) consisted of students who



achieved a high enough FCPT score to enroll into the college level composition course (Hay-Southard & Clay, 2004).

Three separate Pearson correlations were calculated, all of which indicated no statistical significance between FCPT scores and grades (Hay-Southard & Clay, 2004). Developmental course grades from groups 1, 2, and 3 did not indicate a relationship with test scores ( $r(135) = .067, p = .455$ ). Composition grades from groups 1 and 4 indicated no significance ( $r(58) = -.068, p = .641$ ;  $r(33) = .010, p = .957$ ). A random sample of 58 students were selected from group 4, but 25 of them placed into their course using ACT or SAT instead of the FCPT. The final correlation consisted of correlating other course grades, Writing and Grammar/Composition II and Humanities, with the test scores from groups 1 and 4. As previously reported, there was no significance (Group 1  $r(39) = .186, p = .191$ ,  $r(11) = -.139, p = .411$ ; Group 4  $r(14) = .157, p = .0521$ ,  $r(21) = .071, p = .706$ ).

While there was not a significant relationship between course grades and test scores, the study suggested students who completed the developmental writing course from group 1 were more likely to be successful in composition than students who tested directly into the course from group 4. Thirty-seven percent of the students who enrolled directly into their composition course, based on their test scores, did not pass the course (Hay-Southard & Clay, 2004).

The effectiveness and assessment of developmental education was critical to determine whether the remedial courses truly prepared students for the standard level courses. Research suggested mixed results in regard to the reliability and validity of

developmental education programs (Farmer, 1992; Tomlinson, 1989). Several concerns emerged in developmental education. They were: (a) variance among the definitions of developmental education, (b) the relationship between developmental education and the academic programs, (c) inability to identify the competencies needed to transition between programs, (d) lack of evaluation or alternate methods to evaluate, and (e) acceptance of the success measures (Farmer, 1992).

Roueche and Roueche (1999) also suggested that there were a few criticisms associated with developmental education programs if they were not effectively monitored and provided the sufficient resources to support them. Developmental education programs sometimes indicated poor student performance. Community colleges faced the difficulty of determining which students truly needed remedial education and which level was most appropriate for their educational development. Various cognitive and non-cognitive factors tended to effect student performance.

Roueche and Roueche (1999) reported the majority of the community colleges could invest more research in assessing the outcomes of remedial education programs due to their complexity. Another criticism was the fact that remedial education programs were viewed as a duplication of high school services. Some people believed students should have acquired the knowledge and skills while they were in high school to be prepared for collegiate studies. There were a wide range of reasons why students did not complete the college preparatory courses in high school, such as indecisiveness about a career, uninvolved parents, dropping out of high school, and teen pregnancy. Some people believed providing developmental programs were a waste of taxpayer

money; however, most states spent less than \$1,000 annually to remediate a community college student (Roueche & Roueche, 1999).

The ACT Director of Research stated “a large measure of success of a college experience has to do with whether students are able to go immediately into the appropriate college-level courses or whether they will have to be diverted into remediation before they’ll be ready to take the courses they want (ACT, 2002b, p. 1).” Approximately 40 to 50% of college bound students needed some type of developmental education (ACT, 2002b; Kozeracki, 2002; Shults, 1998).

A study was conducted by ACT to determine if improvements were noted when using COMPASS as a pretest and posttest for course placement in developmental education programs (ACT, 2002c). Data were collected from several thousand students representing 9 two-year and 10 four-year colleges. Students who did not have sufficient levels on their ACT or SAT tests were pretested on COMPASS to be placed into their developmental courses. Following these courses, the students completed COMPASS to obtain posttest data. The overall findings indicated that many students did not complete the courses as follows: math 21% completed, reading 42% completed, and writing 30% completed (ACT, 2002c). Those students who completed and passed the posttest levels were 73% in reading, 93% in math, and 91% in writing (ACT, 2002c). Due to ethical issues, a control group was not utilized in this study as it was not recommended to withhold instruction for students who need remediation.

Community colleges were faced with the challenge of determining which students truly needed developmental education. A variety of cognitive and non-

cognitive factors tended to effect student performance, which made the situation complex. Effective community colleges took these factors into consideration when developing policies and procedures to support their learning environment.

### Conceptual Framework

Learners could be trusted to guide their own learning if the environment supports a collaborative process with mutual agreement and effort. Focusing on active learning and assessment allowed the learner to be responsible for his own education. Acknowledging that students had a “voice” in the process impacted their commitment. Providing and communicating the resources to foster this development was a key component for its success. Colleges that used multiple measures (qualitative and quantitative) to support the effectiveness of the institution, to support learning, and to remain accountable to their internal and external constituents (Roueche, Johnson, Roueche, and Associates, 1997). The conceptual framework for this study used a blend of selected adult learning theories and constructivism.

### Adult Learning

Merriam and Caffarella (1991) believed there was not one adult learning theory that completely characterized how adults learn. However, there were numerous theories that aided in the understanding of adults as learners. Merriam (2001, p.5) focused on two pillars of adult learning theory; “andragogy and self-directed learning.”

The first pillar, “andragogy,” was defined as “the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles, 1980, p. 80).” “Andragogy” was based on five principles that described the adult learner: “(1) has an independent self-concept and who can direct his

or her own learning, (2) has accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that is a rich resource for learning, (3) has learning needs closely related to changing social roles, (4) is problem-centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge, and (5) is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors (Merriam, 2001, p.5).” These descriptions of adult learners provided a foundation for the dynamics of adult learning.

The second pillar, self-directed learning, was defined as “learning on one’s own” (Merriam & Cafferalla, 1991, p. 42). Self-directed learning allowed the learner to control his or her learning through the evaluation of one’s own experiences. The learning process was unique to the individual as he became involved in various life situations and learned through the interactions within his environment. Knowles (1975) developed a five-step model to conceptualize self-directed learning: “(1) diagnose learning needs, (2) formulating learning goals, (3) identifying human and material resources for learning, (4) choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and (5) evaluating learning outcomes (p. 18).” Adult learners do not always follow a linear process of learning, but they tended to be more “procedural” in their thinking (Knowles, 1975, p.18). The relationship between faculty and the adult learners could be described as a facilitator as the faculty assisted in guiding the learning process. The method of facilitation and evaluation reflected the desired expectation to intrinsically reward the adult learner.

According to Merriam (2001) there were three categories that shaped self-directed learning: the goals, the process, and the learner. Using a humanistic view, the goals of self-directed learning are the responsibility of the learner. Brockett and

Hiemstra (1991) introduced the Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model which represented a holistic view of the human characteristics associated with self-directed learning and the instructional methods used to promote self-direction. The learner took ownership for achieving his own specified goals.

The transformational process of self-directed learning required critical thinking and reflection. Developing a new concept involved the transformation of existing knowledge into a new perspective or way of thinking. Approximately 90% of adults participate in self-directed learning at least once every year (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). If adults were engaging in self-directed learning within a collegiate environment, faculty should have offered opportunities to capitalize on this self-direction. According to Merriam and Caffarella (1991), educators should have assisted by offering individualized projects, incorporated instructional methods to foster self-direction, and established institutional policies and governance that supported the notion of self-directed learning.

Knowles (1975) presented a process of self-directed learning that was more linear as previously stated; however, Grow (1991; 1994) suggested that learning was based on the readiness of the learner. Teachers could facilitate the learning process by assisting students to become more self-directed. Using the foundations of situational leadership, Grow (1991) presented the following stages: "Stage 1: Learners of low self-direction who need an authority figure (a professor) to tell them what to do; Stage 2: Learners of moderate self-direction who are motivated and confident but largely ignorant of the subject matter to be learned; Stage 3: Learners of immediate self-

direction who have both the skill and the basic knowledge and view themselves as being both ready and able to explore a specific subject area with a good guide; and Stage 4: Learners of high self-direction who are both willing and able to plan, execute, and evaluate their own learning with or without the help of an expert (p. 129-135). ”

A few critics of the adult learning principles believed these assumptions may be applicable to a variety of age groups (Beder & Carrea, 1988). Beder & Carrea (1988) found using self-directed learning activities in the classroom did improve attendance; however, the student evaluations of these instructional methods indicated no difference in comparison to the traditional methods.

Cohen and Brawer (2003) stated that community college students tended to be less motivated and needed more direct instruction in comparison to their counterparts who attended four-year institutions. Community college students were more apt to focus on obtaining the necessary skills to seek higher levels of employment and not necessarily merely on academics. Voorhees and Zhou (2000) reported that 66% of the students were taking degree or transfer credit, 21% to acquire job related skills, and 12% were taking courses for personal interest. Cohen and Brawer (2003) also stated there was research that supported four-year institution students were also motivated by the monetary value of higher education. Knowing that many community college students were taking transfer credits, it seemed these students should be classified as four-year students as they ultimately were seeking a baccalaureate degree. An argument could have been made that community college students may be equally motivated to achieve their educational goals just as a student that initially entered the

four-year institution. As a result, the focus of a collegiate education should have been to treat all adults as mature learners that are capable and responsible for their own learning (Rogers, 2002).

Some community colleges needed to focus on revamping their curriculum and instructional methods as the campuses continued to become more and more diverse. Goldenberg and Stout (1994) states “the special mission of the community college, which is to empower students by moving them from passive learning to active learning, verifies the need for more transformation projects (p. 107).”

Pratt (1993) supports “andragogy” as he stated “andragogy has been adopted by legions of adult educators around the world..... very likely, it will continue to be the window through which adult educators take their first look into the world of adult education. However, while “andragogy” may have contributed to our understanding of adults as learners, it has done little to expand or clarify our understanding of the learning process (p. 21).”

The learning process in the classroom was the primary focus for all educators. Taking into consideration the type of student and incorporating appropriate instructional and evaluation methods should have enhanced the learning environment. Houle (1996) stated “education is fundamentally the same wherever and whenever it occurs. It deals with such basic concerns as the nature of the learner, the goals sought, and the social and physical milieu in which instruction occurs, and the techniques of learning or teaching used. These and other components may be combined in infinite ways....



“Andragogy” remains the most learner-centered of all patterns of adult educational programming (p. 20-30).”

The mission of a community college was “to empower students by moving them from passive learning to active learning (Goldenberg & Stout, 1994, p. 107).” Knowing that more non-traditional students were returning to community college campuses and that they tended to be more self-directed further supported the need for an active learner-centered environment.

### Constructivism

Constructivism was a learning theory based on the notion that individuals construct knowledge and meaning through their interactions and analyses with their environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning was constructed inside the learner and this process leads to new questions and inquiry. Each learner created his own learning in his own way. Lev Vygotsky (1978) proposed the learner controlled the intellectual transformation by reconciling the instructional experience with prior knowledge. Self-reflection fostered the connection to previous experiences that allowed for producing meaningful insights and abilities. As learners obtained more control over their cognitive processes, they further developed their meta-cognitive knowledge and abilities (Englert, Raphael, Fear, & Anderson, 1988). Through meta-cognitive knowledge, learners began to recognize various strategies that aided in their learning. Englert et al. (1988) also reported that meta-cognitive knowledge positively correlated with student writing abilities.

Lev Vygotsky (1978) suggested that knowledge was constructed through social interactions in which learners shared, constructed, and reconstructed information. Emig (2003) supported Vygotsky as she stated higher order thinking skills “seem to develop most fully only with the support of verbal language – particularly, it seems, of written language (p.7).” The teacher or facilitator guided the interaction through experiential learning to create meaningful exploration of a concept. The social interactions between the teachers and learners were a vital component in the process. The teacher must have presented information just above the cognitive ability of the learner in order to engage learning. Vygotsky (1978) proposed that learning should be within the individuals “zone of proximal development (p. 86).” Learning occurred when an individual became aware of a concept and constructed knowledge or meaning from the experience. Sharing the commitment to learn was key to its effectiveness. Helping students learn how to learn encouraged students to regulate their own development.

Students constructed knowledge when they engaged in a learning community that shared information using both verbal and non-verbal communication to build upon prior experiences. Constructivism was based on collaboration and negotiation among the students and faculty. Tobin and Fraser (1991) reiterated this notion by stating that “social construction of knowledge in a culture involves negotiation and consensus building among the members of the culture (p. 222).” Students became active participants in their learning and made meaningful learning connections. They reflected upon prior knowledge by organizing, analyzing, synthesizing, explaining, or evaluating the information (Emig, 2003; Keefe & Jenkins, 1997).

A constructivist philosophy incorporated the theoretical underpinnings throughout the College. The creation of policy should have been in congruence with its beliefs and values. In the classroom, the faculty utilized constructivist instructional methods and assessment tools to evaluate learning.

“Authentic instruction stimulates students to consider their prior knowledge and to explore connections with the ideas under consideration (Keefe & Jenkins, p. 59).” Allowing time and providing opportunities for reflection and discussion supported this philosophy. Internalizing information to develop higher-order thinking was critical in a collegiate environment. Concept formation was directly related to the relationship of thought and language. Effective writers must have had knowledge of the writing process (planning, drafting, editing, and revising) and organizational structures (Engert et al. (1988).

Vygotsky (1978) postulated an internalization process consisted of “a series of transformations.” These included: “(a) an operation that initially represents an external activity is reconstructed and begins to occur internally; (b) an interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one; and (c) the transformation of an interpersonal process into an intrapersonal one is the result of a long series of developmental events (p. 59)”.

Students processed information based on the stimuli that was presented. Faculty who used self-generated tools often stimulated higher order learning. In order to initiate an effective response, a student must have been “drawn into” by the stimuli or “sign” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 39). The linkage between the stimuli and the response determined

whether the student was engaged in the learning process. Vygotsky (1978) suggested pre-school children were not able to organize stimuli; however by adulthood external stimuli became internalized and mediated behavior developed. Vygotsky (1978) also emphasized the importance of social interaction in constructing and reconstructing knowledge. "The interaction between changing social conditions and the biological substrata of behavior" was essential for learning (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 24).

Vygotsky (1986) presented the notion that language was a means for reflection and expansion of experiences of which was personalized and a "profoundly social human process (p. 126)." There were not two people that constructed the exact same knowledge because each person had unique qualities and experiences, cognitive structures, motivations, and preferred learning styles (Ellis, 2001). Expanding the "zone of proximal development" to include affective factors should enhance the learning process. Wells (1999, p. 331) stated the "zone of proximal development is deepened through an examination of affective factors in learning."

Learning first occurred on a social level and then on an individual level. The developmental changes that transpired in language occurred in the usage of "sign operations" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 39). "Signs" were internal tools used by individuals to extend the operation of their memory. The writing process was an expansion of verbal language and communication. According to Emig (2003, p. 12) writing was a mode of learning that incorporated self-talk and Vygotsky's belief in "deliberate structuring". Incorporating elements from one's environment serves as memory aided to build perceptions for learning. "Sign operations are used in writing and reading among other

expressive tools” ..... “the product of specific conditions of social development (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 39).”

Achieving more complex forms of cognitive perception or higher order thinking required the use of intellectual tools that were related to language development (Vygotsky, 1978). There were essentially two developmental levels proposed by Vygotsky (1978, p. 86): (1) actual developmental level and (2) “zone of proximal development.” One’s actual developmental level was when mental functions can be naturally completed without assistance from others. The “zone of proximal development” was a level just above the actual level in which a task could be accomplished with assistance from others or instruction.

According to Vygotsky (1978), the “zone of proximal development is the distance between actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (p. 89).” “Good learning” was in advance of actual development (Vygotsky, 1978, p.89). The relationship between learning and development required assimilation with the environment. Learning must have been at or within one’s developmental capabilities or in the zone of proximal development. Essentially there were two tenets of the proposed developmental process. First of all, learning was related to mental development but it did not occur in parallel. Secondly, that external knowledge was internalized (Vygotsky, 1978).

Bizzell (2003) stated that composition experts tended to agree with some of the connections mirrored in the language and cognitive development. In particular, individuals used innate abilities to learn verbal language to further develop cognitive functions. These abilities were developed to establish thought patterns to categorize experiences to use in writing. The differences between composition faculty were whether writing was primarily “inner-directed or outer-directed (Bizzell, 2003, p.389).” The notion of “inner-directed” focused on the internal learning and thought processes while the “outer-directed” notion of the social process that shaped the learning (Bizzell, 2003, p.389).

While there were some variations in the interpretation of constructivism, there are four common tenets. Applefield, Huber, and Moallem (2001) proposed the following foundational elements were shared among constructivists: “(1) learners construct their own learning; (2) the dependence of new learning on students’ existing understanding; (3) the critical role of social interaction and; (4) the necessity of authentic learning tasks for meaningful learning (p. 38).”

The pedagogical methods of instruction promoted constructivist thinking. Although there were times in which lecturing may be appropriate to explain explicit factual information. The constructivist learning activities related to specific real world problems and stimulated the cognitive processes. Applefield, Huber, and Moallem (2001) derived a list of general approaches to support this concept: “(1) Learners should be encouraged to raise questions, generate hypotheses and test their validity; (2) Learners should be challenged by ideas and experiences that generate inner cognitive

conflict or disequilibrium. Students' errors should be viewed positively as opportunities for learners and teachers to explore conceptual understanding; (3) Students should be given time to engage in reflection through journal writing, drawing, modeling, and discussion. Learning occurs through reflective abstraction; (4) The learning environment should provide ample opportunities for dialogue and the classroom should be seen as a "community of discourse" engaged in activity, reflection, and conversation" (Fosnot, 1989, p. 116 ); (5) In a community of learners, it is the students themselves who must communicate their ideas to others, defend and justify them and; (6) Students should work with big ideas, central organizing principles that have the power to generalize across experiences and disciplines (p. 50)".

The assessment methods in a constructivist classroom focused on reflective writing. Students were given specific topics to compose an essay or paper to reveal the learning that had transpired. Henry (2002) stated, "Students need to demonstrate their mastery of American history by constructing and evaluating arguments, identifying varying points of view and using evidence to support theses. Essays should be assigned for both in-class and out-of-class evaluations (p. 71)."

Using an active learning approach such as constructivism was incorporated into most classrooms and was applicable for all learners. Writing required a student to coordinate a set of mental activities. Bruning, Schraw, Norby, and Ronning (2004) stated, "Learning is a constructive process, mental structures for organizing memory and guiding thought, motivation and beliefs as integral parts of cognition and social interaction as a fundamental part of cognitive development all play major roles in the

writing process (p. 292).” Self-beliefs could have affected student learning as ideations became a “principle component of academic motivation which is grounded on the assumption that the beliefs that students create, develop, and hold to be true about themselves are vital forces in their success or failure in school (Pajares, 2003, p. 140).”

The role of assessment was based on the educational outcome. One way to measure a performance outcome in English was to request a writing sample, essay, or portfolio. Assessment should have occurred prior to instruction, during, and at the end of instruction. Instructional objectives were the framework for selecting instructional and assessment methods (Gronlund, 2004). In order to achieve higher-level thinking, the methods stimulated analysis, synthesis, and evaluate thoughts (Gronlund, 2004). The thinking skills required to problem-solve seemed to parallel many of the tenets of constructivism (Gronlund, 2004). Problem-solving typically used the following sequence of activities: “(1) identifying and analyzing a problem, (2) applying past learning, (3) gathering new information, (4) organizing and comparing data, (5) analyzing elements and relationships, (6) clarifying and judging alternatives, and (7) summarizing a solution or selecting a course of action (Gronlund, 2004, p. 65).”

Learner-centered Education. According to Henson (2003), constructivism evolved out of learner-centered education. McCombs and Whisler (1997) defined learner-centered education “as the perspective that couples a focus on individual learners (their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs) with a focus on learning (p. 9).” Learning involved a process in which all learners had supportive programs, policies and services that guided their



learning. This model focused on maximizing learning. In order to capitalize on this philosophy, McCombs and Whisler (1997) offered four guiding principles as follows: “

(1) Learners are included in educational decision-making process, whether those decisions concern what learners focus on in their learning or what rules are established for the classroom; (2) The diverse perspectives of learners are encouraged and respected during learning experiences; (3) The differences among learners’ culture, abilities, styles, developmental stages and needs are accounted for and respected; and (4) Learners are treated as co creators in the teaching and learning process, as individuals with ideas and issues that deserve attention and consideration (p. 11).”

O’Banion (1999) proposed that there are six principles for community colleges to be classified as learning colleges. These include: “(1) The learning college creates substantive change in individual learners; (2) The learning college engages learners in the learning process as full partners who must assume primary responsibility for their own choices; (3) The learning college creates and offers as many options as possible; (4) The learning college assists learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities; (5) The learning college defines the roles of the learners and; (6) The learning college and its facilitators succeed only when improved and expanded learning can be documented for learners (O’Bannion, 1999, p.5).”

### Summary

The existing literature in the area of standardized testing focused on several underlying issues that dated back to the early 1900’s: the reliability of standardized tests, the controversy associated with cultural bias, the uses for selection and course

placement, and the lack of an universal agreement continues to spark the interest for future studies. Some researchers supported the use of standardized testing while others did not. Using multiple assessment measures such as self-directed writing prompts to supplement standardized tests could improve the writing course placement practices at Iowa community colleges. The assessment methods selected supported the philosophical underpinnings of the colleges and was applicable to their student population. The intent of this literature view was to inform the reader of the need for further investigations to address this complex issue.

### CHAPTER 3

#### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the efficacy of the writing course placement practices at an Iowa community college. To support the existing research, multiple measures of data were collected from the participants. Student data consisted of COMPASS test scores, self-directed essays (ratings and content), and course placement surveys. These assessments measured students' writing ability and perceptions of their course placement. Faculty data consisted of transcribed interview responses, which included their perception of the self-directed students' course placement. In order to obtain a rich understanding of the phenomena, a mixed methodological design was used to address the following research questions in this study:

1. What indicators, separately or in combination, resulted in an appropriate or inappropriate student writing placement?
  - a. To what extent did the COMPASS test result in an appropriate placement?
  - b. To what extent did the self-directed essay result in an appropriate placement?
  - c. To what extent did a student's preference result in an appropriate placement?

#### Research Design

The design of this study incorporated a mixed methodology (equivalent status design). Through the strategic use of both qualitative and quantitative research methods, at various points, the study provided a rich understanding of the phenomena

(Creswell, 1994). Triangulation of data resulted from the use of mixed methods, which also had the effect of strengthening the results and removing the perception of researcher bias. This methodology was used because it incorporated multiple assessment measures, allowed for triangulation of data, and added breadth to the study.

The tradition of phenomenology as a qualitative framework provided a synthesis of the knowledge to describe an appropriate and inappropriate placement (Creswell, 1998). Phenomenology has its philosophical roots in the social and human sciences (Creswell, 1998). Phenomenology, defined by Creswell (1998, p. 51) described the “meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon.” The tenet of Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, viewed the relationship between the individual and his environment as created by one’s “directedness or intentionality (Rasmussen, 1998, p. 555).” The purpose of phenomenology was to describe the interactions between variables to search for all possible meaning (Creswell, 1998).

#### Sources of Data

The sources of data for this study were: (a) COMPASS test score, (b) essay rating, (c) student course preference, (d) student essays, (e) student placement surveys at 6 and 15 weeks, and (f) faculty interviews. Data collection consisted of a 38-week period, April through December 2004.

#### Data Collection

Data were collected from students using the COMPASS writing test, a self-directed essay, and placement surveys. The COMPASS test and essay results allowed

the advisors, counselors, and faculty to place students into the appropriate level of writing courses based on the placement scores. The surveys were used to determine if students were satisfied with their course placement at two points in time. Data were also collected from several English faculty. Selected faculty members were asked to complete placement satisfaction forms at the end of their writing courses. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with these faculty members to further explain their satisfaction ratings and perceptions of the writing course placement practices.

#### Participant Selection

The results of this study primarily focused on three student samples: 201 students who at the minimum completed the placement assessments; 117 students who completed the assessments and used the placement indicators to enroll in a writing course; and 28 of these students were included in the independent analysis.

The participant selection consisted of 201 general studies and business administration students who completed the self-directed essay and COMPASS test between the months of April and August 2004. The students seeking general studies and business administration programs were selected because this population was most representative of the College's enrollment. Students enrolled in these programs were more representative (age, gender, and ethnicity) of the College as a whole than students who enrolled in technical programs such as diesel truck or nursing. In addition, general studies and business administration programs have flexible admissions policies in comparison to several of the technical programs. Students seeking enrollment in a

health sciences program are required to have an acceptable COMPASS score for admission in their program.

Of the 201 students, 117 of them (58.2%) completed the COMPASS test, essay, and enrolled into a writing course for the fall semester. Forty-four of the 201 (21.9%) students scheduled for courses; however, they did not enroll in a writing course. Some of these students requested CLEP information or enrolled part-time, while others could not fit a writing course into their schedule due to their availability. The remaining 40 of the 201 students (19.9%) who completed the essay and COMPASS test chose not to enroll in the College. Some of these students requested to have their test scores sent to another community college. The sample size was slightly reduced to 107 within the first month of the semester; six of the students were dropped from their courses for failure of payment and four of them withdrew from all their courses. At 10 weeks into the semester, just before the last day to withdraw, it was noted seven more students had withdrawn from their writing course; five of them from all their courses. One-hundred students participated in the entire study. The students for the independent analysis were selected based on their random distribution and faculty participation.

The mean age of the student sample ( $n = 117$ ) was 21.6 years with a standard deviation of 6.90 years. Students ranged in age from 18 years to 49 years old. A slight majority of the students were female (50.4%), which was representative of the College's student population. The majority of students identified themselves as Caucasian (77.8%), while the second largest population identified themselves as African American/Black (15.3%). This ethnic breakdown was also representative of the

College. Most of the students ranged in age from 18-23 (81.1%), while the other students were 24 years or older (18.8%). The number of students over the age of 24 was under-representative of the adult student population when comparing the College as a whole. The fall 2004 enrollment figures indicated there were 1617 out of 5436 (29.75%) students 24 years or older. Frequencies and percentages are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Students\**

Characteristics	Number	Percent
Gender:		
Male	58	49.5
Female	59	50.4
Ethnicity:		
African American/Black	18	15.3
Asian American/Pacific Islander	1	.009
Caucasian/White	91	77.8
Mexican American/Hispanic	2	1.7
Preferred not to Respond	5	4.3
Age:		
18-23 years old	95	81.1
24 years old and older	22	18.8

Note. \* N = 117

In addition to the student participants, 6 writing faculty from the developmental writing and English departments participated in a semi-structured interview. The exact

number of faculty was determined based on the random distribution of students in their writing courses. The writing faculty members who had “self-directed placement” students in their classes were sorted by their course title (SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I, SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II, and CM: 113T Composition I). Two faculty members from each course were asked to participate in the study. The researcher started by asking the faculty members with the most “self-directed placement” students to ensure an adequate sample size. Six faculty members, who were asked first, graciously volunteered to participate. These faculty members had at least three “directed self-placement” students who took their course(s). The writing faculty were at the minimum in their second year with an average of 4.6 years of teaching. Five of them taught both developmental and standard level writing courses.

### Instruments

#### COMPASS Test

The Computer Adaptive Placement Assessment and Support System (COMPASS) writing test was a standardized test developed by ACT. Students took this test to satisfy the assessment requirement for college admissions. The test was designed to measure student ability in reading, writing, and mathematics and has been used by the College for over six-years. Demographic questions were built into the software to collect data on specific student characteristics, such as gender, age, and ethnicity. The reliability of this assessment varies between a .89 -.91 depending on the subject and the test length (COMPASS, 2000). Test administrators had the option of selecting a standard, extended, or a maximum length of time. The standard level was selected.



COMPASS cut-scores were set several years ago to direct students into specific writing courses. After consulting the College's writing faculty, ACT, and other peer institutions, College administrators established the following cut-score ranges: 1-19 Review in Writing/Metro Campus; 20-40 SC:015D Fundamentals of Writing I; 41-64 SC:017D Fundamentals of Writing II; and 65-100 CM:113T Composition I. Refer to Appendix A for a list of the course descriptions.

### Writing Prompt

The writing prompt, course descriptors, and course checklist were designed using the "directed self-placement" model by Royer and Gilles (1998, p. 1) and Luna (2003, p. 377) for two purposes. First, the prompt allowed students to have a "voice" in their writing course placement. Secondly, the essays identified writing ability. Prior to this study, essays were not typically administered before students registered for their courses.

The self-directed writing prompt was created using a multi-disciplinary team, which consisted of the researcher, developmental writing faculty, English faculty, and the Director of Developmental Education. Several drafts of the prompt, course descriptors, and a course checklist were revised until the team reached a consensus (Appendix A). The team decided to slightly adjust Royer and Gilles' (1998) course checklist sheet with their permission. The writing prompt and course descriptors were created to reflect the needs of the writing departments and students. The students were asked to review three course descriptions and descriptive checklist statements for each course (SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I; SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II;

and CM: 113T Composition I) and to select the course that honestly reflected where they should begin their writing course placement. Students were asked to write a multi-paragraph essay in Standard English and cite examples to support their decision. Students were given an hour to write an essay on the paper that was provided.

The faculty had training and experience developing writing prompts and evaluating essays using a holistic evaluation. In 2001, the developmental and English faculty participated in a twelve-hour prompt development training conducted by Edward M. White, a professor of English at California State University. Following the consultant recommendations, the faculty incorporated his guiding principles into the development of several prompts their department. Since 2001, the developmental writing faculty have used the holistic view of Edward M. White to assist with developmental course placement and to evaluate student progress. Writing samples were administered during their courses to determine students' writing ability.

The evaluative criterion consisted of a six-point scale to measure content, focus, mechanics, and organization (Appendix B). Two independent ratings were conducted for each essay. If there was not exact agreement, a third rater evaluated the essay. Prior ratings indicated that the reliability of the two independent faculty raters varied between 50 and 60% depending on the prompt utilized each semester. In Fall of 2001, the faculty were in exact agreement 58% of the time, while in Spring 2002, the faculty were in exact agreement 52% of the time. As indicated, some faculty dyads were not in exact agreement on a students' writing ability. However, it should be noted approximately

97% of these essays were originally rated within one score above or below each rating (adjacent agreement).

### Survey

The survey was developed by the researcher to collect descriptive data about the student's satisfaction with their course placement (Appendix C). Questions were created to determine if students believed they were appropriately placed into their writing course at two points in time. Several questions were designed using a five-point Likert scale to aid in the data analysis (Appendix C).

The first survey was administered approximately 6 weeks into their courses to obtain the students' satisfaction after the completion of at least one assignment. The timing was critical as the survey could prompt students to have discussions about their placements. If students decided they were dissatisfied with their courses, they still had the option of withdrawing or selecting another course starting in the middle of the semester. The second survey was administered approximately 15 weeks into the students' writing courses to determine if there was a relationship between the student responses.

### Interview

Developmental writing and English faculty were interviewed during the fifteenth week of the Fall 2004 semester. The researcher developed questions to determine if faculty perceived the self-directed students, who completed the essay, were appropriately placed into their courses based on their writing ability (Appendix D). Appropriate placement was based on whether faculty perceived a student had adequate

writing skills consistent with the course. Faculty members were unaware of which students completed the self-directed essay until the fifteenth week in order to protect the student participants. At this point in time, the Faculty rated their course placement satisfaction using a five-point Likert scale for each student who participated in this study (Appendix E). Faculty were asked during the interview to share their rating form and cite examples from student artifacts (portfolios or papers) to support their decision. Faculty were also asked if there were any recommended changes to further improve the writing course placement practices.

#### Gaining Access

The Vice President of Academic Affairs was contacted to receive permission to conduct this study. In addition, meetings were held to discuss the procedures with the Dean of Arts and Sciences, selected Faculty, Director of Student Services, Director of Enrollment Management, Department Chair of Developmental Education, Counselors, and Academic Advisors. Upon approval from the community college administrators and notification from the University of Northern Iowa Institutional Review Board, the participants were selected.

#### Procedure

Assessment sessions were set aside specifically for students who needed to take, at the minimum, the COMPASS writing test and were planning on scheduling for the Fall 2004 semester. The students were administered the self-directed writing prompt and then were routed into the COMPASS test. After students completed the COMPASS test, the Evaluation Coordinator or the Assistant Coordinator immediately

informed them of their COMPASS scores and when the essay results would be available. Before leaving the placement office, the students were encouraged to set up their scheduling appointments. This recruitment approach aided in retention by connecting them to their next step in the enrollment process. Appointments were recommended a few days after the testing to allow the faculty time to rate the essays.

The self-directed essays were assigned a number and the identification information was removed by the researcher. The essays were given to the Department Chair of Developmental Education to initiate the evaluation process. The writing faculty from the developmental and the English departments evaluated the essays each week using the holistic criteria (Appendix B). Two independent ratings were conducted for each essay. If there was not an exact agreement, a third rater evaluated the essay. The raters were given breaks after 50 minutes of evaluation to avoid fatigue. The essays were returned to the Department Chair of Developmental Education who in turn forwarded them to the Evaluation Coordinator. The scores were given to the academic advisors, counselors, and faculty to use for course registration.

At the time of course registration, students were informed of their essay scores through the use of course placement summary forms. This form indicated the student's COMPASS score, essay score, and preferred course selection. In addition, the final placement recommendation was indicated. Almost all of the students, 114 out of 117 (97.4%), scheduled their writing courses based on the placement recommendations. Students who had two or more similar placement indicators were recommended to take that course; SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I, SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing

II, or CM: 113T Composition I. If there was not agreement between two of these indicators, students could use either the COMPASS writing score or the essay score to self-select their course. If students had any questions about their placement, the form indicated they were to contact the Evaluation Coordinator. There were no students who contacted the Evaluation Coordinator with further questioning.

Approximately 6 weeks into the fall semester, surveys were administered to the students. The faculty members were given an envelope with the survey materials and were instructed to give it to their students. Students were asked to follow the instructions, complete the surveys, and promptly return them to the Evaluation Coordinator or a designee. Specific information was requested so they could be identified and sorted by the researcher. Approximately 15 weeks into the fall semester, the second survey was administered using the same procedures. At the completion of the course, 6 English faculty members rated their satisfaction with the placement and participated in a semi-structured interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, verbatim.

#### Data Description

The study yielded descriptive, quantitative, and qualitative data. Comparisons, both separately and in combination, were made between the three indicators: COMPASS writing tests, self-directed essays, and student course preferences. The comparisons between the COMPASS writing test and the self-directed essay were based on their initial cut-score ranges. A score of 1 or 2 on the essay and between 20 and 40 on the COMPASS writing test indicated both measures placed students into SC: 015D

Fundamentals of Writing I. Students who scored a 3 or 4 on the essay and between 41 and 64 on COMPASS indicated both measures placed students into SC: 017D

Fundamentals of Writing II. Students who scored a 5 or 6 on the essay and above a 65 on COMPASS placed into CM: 113T Composition I. Student course preferences were assigned a numeric value at the onset of this study. These included the following values: SC:015 Fundamentals of Writing I was assigned numeral 1, SC:017D Fundamentals of Writing II was assigned numeral 2 and CM:113T Composition I for assigned numeral 3.

### Data Analysis

Analysis of the data were completed in order to ascertain the comparability of the placement measures. To describe the student population, specific characteristics (age, gender, and ethnicity) were summarized using frequencies and percentages. The student course placement data (COMPASS test scores, self-directed essay ratings, and student course preferences) separately or in combination, were also described using frequencies and percentages. A Pearson correlation was calculated to determine if there was a relationship between the student satisfaction responses of their writing course placement at two points in the semester. Finally, the student course placement data, including the actual essays, were integrated with the student satisfaction surveys and faculty satisfaction ratings to complete an independent analysis of the selected students.

In order to identify themes or patterns within the 201 student essays, the constant comparison method evolved into a three phase process:

Phase One: As each essay was read, keywords and significant ideas relevant to the study were noted. After two readings, specific quotes were extracted from the essays and entered into a word processor. Duplicate quotes were not extracted from an essay.

Phase Two: The quotes were coded and categorized. Each quote was assigned a code and put into a specific category. The researcher compared each quote with other quotes within each category to determine consistency. The initial reviewing of the essays resulted in the identification of five categories: level of confidence, ability, motivation, value involvement, and adult/work experiences. After consultation from an outside reviewer, these categories were further analyzed and refined by the researcher. The categories of level of confidence and ability were combined and a new category was created, off topic.

Phase Three: Two independent coders; professional level employees of the College not involved in the project, were selected and trained to obtain a reliability measure of the coding process. The first coder was given the list of definitions and several sample quotes with their classifications as a part of the training. Following the training, the coder classified 25 random quotes, several from each category. The first coder was able to accurately categorize 22 out of 25 quotes (.88). A discussion ensued that revealed the difficulty to categorize two of the adult/work experience quotes. Some of the examples provided by non-traditional students were not explicit enough to be classified into only one category as they also revealed elements of level of confidence. The researcher refined the category to only include work experience and decided to



capture the other adult life experiences under the category level of confidence. Both coders were further trained and independently classified the same 25 quotes with the slight adjustment in the coding definitions. The researcher compared both of the classifications with her own. Even with the minor coding adjustment, each coder was in agreement with the researcher 88% of the time.

The definitions of the categories were:

1. Level of Confidence: Expression of self-assurance based on the meta-cognitive awareness of one's writing skills.
2. Student Motivation: Explanation of an event, situation, or desire that drives students to reach their highest potential.
3. Work Experience: Description of the knowledge and skills acquired from performing tasks as an employee.
4. Value Involvement: Expression of appreciation for being included in the course placement decision.
5. Off Topic: Focus of the essay was not related to the topic of the writing prompt.

After the final coding system was devised, the frequency of the student comments/quotes to support their preferred course placement decision was listed in Table 2. Numerous students provided multiple statements to support their level of confidence. Each statement was coded independently.

Table 2

*Student Essay Response Totals\**

Category	Frequency of Responses
Level of Confidence	
High	122
Medium	115
Low	88
Student Motivation	41
Work Experience	23
Value Involvement	17
Off Topic	3

Note.\* Most students had more than one explanation for their level of confidence.

### Summary

The design of this study incorporated a mixed methodology. Data compiled from the placement indicators, student essays, student placement surveys, and faculty interviews allowed for the triangulation of data and incorporated multiple assessment measures to add breadth to the study. The phenomenological data analysis proceeded “through the methodology of reduction, the analysis of specific statements and themes, and a search for all possible meaning (Creswell, 1998, p. 52).”

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

The following five sections in this chapter will describe the efficacy of the writing course placement practices at an Iowa Community College. Section one examined the student course placement data (COMPASS test scores, essay ratings, and student course preferences) separately and in combination. The results indicated the need for using multiple measures for course placement as there was not a single indicator that clearly predicted student placement. The second section identified the patterns or themes that emerged from the student essays. These essays suggested there were other factors to consider such as confidence, motivation, and work experience when placing students into their writing courses, especially if a student scored in the decision zone. The third section, survey data, showed the majority of the students (85.2% at 6 weeks and 89.1% at 15 weeks) were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with their course placement. All of the students expected to earn a C grade or higher. The fourth section, satisfaction measures, indicated a moderate relationship between the student satisfaction at 6 and 15 weeks into the course;  $r(59) = .524$ . Within the independent analysis, the majority of the students (85.7%) were either in agreement or indicated an adjacent agreement with their instructors. The faculty also revealed their perceptions of the writing prompt and course placement process. All of the faculty preferred using multiple writing assessments to place students in at least the developmental writing courses; SC 015D Fundamentals of Writing I or SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II.

In order to obtain an in-depth view of the course placements, the final section consisted of an independent analysis of 28 students. This analysis provided a description of the measures used to support an appropriate or inappropriate course placement using the Compass scores, essay ratings and content, student surveys, and faculty perception. The independent analysis indicated agreement among all three placement indicators would result in an appropriate course placement. In addition, any combination of two placement indicators should also result in an appropriate placement. The independent analysis had an instructional value as students identified their writing skills, involvement, and non-cognitive factors that contributed to their learning. The faculty who evaluated the essays gained a better understanding of students' critical thinking skills, organization, writing ability, and style. Another benefit of this approach was advisors, counselors, and faculty who registered students could use this analysis to obtain a better understanding of course placement and how to assist students who scored in the decision zone. The triangulation of data within this analysis provided a rich understanding of the phenomena.

#### Student Course Placement

The course placement indicators (COMPASS test scores, essay ratings, and student course preferences) used to recommend a student's placement separately or in combination, are identified in Table 3. These course placement recommendations were used by the students to select their writing courses during their group or individual scheduling appointments. Students were given a copy of their course placement summary form which informed them of their essay rating, COMPASS score, and course

preference. The Evaluation Coordinator's final placement recommendation was indicated on the form. Nine students were removed from the student course placement recommendations in Table 3 as they scored below a score of 20 on the COMPASS test. Students who score within the range of 1-19 are typically referred to an off campus center to review basic writing skills. However, these students were given the option of taking the lowest level writing course, SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I, on campus due to their essay ratings.

Table 3

*Student Recommendations Based on Course Placement Indicators*

Indicator	Number of Students	Percent
COMPASS*	8	7.4
COMPASS/Essay Rating	15	13.9
COMPASS/Self-Placement	15	13.9
Essay Rating*	2	1.9
Essay Rating/Self-Placement	32	29.6
Agreement among All Indicators	36	33.3
No Agreement with Self-Placement	10	9.2
Agreement between at least Two Indicators	98	90.8

Note. \* Student's initial placement was based on no agreement between indicators.  
N=108

Agreement among all three placement indicators comprised of 36 out of 108 (33.3%) students. An example of this scenario follows: If a student scored 65 or above on the COMPASS test, a 5 or above on the essay, and the student selected Composition I as his preferred course placement, then all three measures recommended this student start with the same course. Agreement between at least two of the three indicators, in any combination, comprised of 98 out of 108 (90.8%) students. Only 10 students (9.2%) were not in agreement with either their essay rating or COMPASS score. These students were required to use one of the assessments to select their writing course. Of these 10 students, 8 of them self-selected their writing course based on their COMPASS test scores.

#### Course Placement Surveys

Approximately 6 weeks and again at 15 weeks into the fall semester, course placement surveys were administrated to the students. Of the 117 students enrolled in a writing course, six of them were removed from their courses for failure to pay their tuition and four of them withdrew from all of their courses.

A total of 88 of the 107 surveys (82.2%) were returned at approximately 6 weeks into the semester. The majority of these students (95.4%) enrolled in their first writing course at the College. Four students had taken a writing course several years ago and returned to finish their degree requirements. Table 4 describes selected percentages and frequencies of the survey results.

Table 4

*Student Survey Results\**

Item	Number (6 weeks)	Percent	Number (15 weeks)	Percent
Very Satisfied or Satisfied with Placement	75	85.2	57	89.1
Prepared for Assignments	70	79.5	54	84.3
Ease of Assignments (at least capable)	81	92.0	62	96.9
Expected Grade (C or above)	88	100.0	64	100.0
Very Satisfied or Satisfied with Involvement	67	76.1	--	---

Note. \* N = 88 at 6 weeks; N = 64 at 15 weeks

At 6 weeks, the majority of the students indicated they were very satisfied or satisfied with their course placement (85.2%). The individual student responses were as follows: very satisfied 32 (36.4%); satisfied 43 (48.9%); undecided 12 (13.6%); dissatisfied 1 (1.1%); and very dissatisfied 0 (0%). Students were asked how prepared they were for the assignments in their writing course. Seventy of these students (79.5%) felt at least adequately prepared for the assignments in their courses. The individual student responses were as follows: not prepared 2 (2.2%); somewhat prepared 16 (18.2%); adequately prepared 45 (51.5%); very prepared 22 (25%); and over prepared 3 (3.4%). The majority of the students 81 (92%) perceived the difficulty

of their assignments at least within their capabilities. The individual student responses were as follows: too difficult 1 (1.1%); difficult 6 (6.8%); within your capabilities 63 (71.6%); easy 16 (18.2%); and too easy 2 (2.3%). At 6 weeks students were also asked to indicate the grade they expected to earn in their writing course. All of the 88 students (100%) expected to achieve at least a C in their course. The individual student responses were as follows: grade of A 30 (34%); grade of B 49 (55.7%); grade of C 9 (10.2%). The final question asked students to describe their satisfaction with their involvement in the writing course placement decision. The majority of them 67 (76.1%) were either very satisfied or satisfied with their involvement. The individual student responses were as follows: very satisfied 24 (27.3%); satisfied 43 (48.9%); undecided 19 (21.6%); dissatisfied 1 (1.1%); and very dissatisfied 1 (1.1%).

Approximately 10 weeks into the semester, just before the last day to withdraw, seven of the students withdrew from their writing course. Of these students, five of them withdrew from all of their courses. At approximately the fifteenth week into the course, a total of 64 surveys out of 100 (64%) were returned. The majority of the students indicated they were very satisfied or satisfied with their course placement (89.1%). The individual student responses were as follows: very satisfied 31 (48.4%); satisfied 26 (40.6%); undecided 6 (9.4%); dissatisfied 1 (1.6%); and very dissatisfied 0 (0%). Students were asked how prepared they were for the assignments in their writing course. Fifty-four of these students (84.3%) felt at least adequately prepared for the assignments in their courses. The individual student responses were as follows: not prepared 0 (0%); somewhat prepared 10 (15.1%); adequately prepared 25 (39.1%); very



prepared 27 (42.2%); and over prepared 2 (3.1%). The majority of the students 62 (96.9%) perceived the difficulty of their assignments at least within their capabilities.

The individual student responses were as follows: too difficult 0 (0%); difficult 2 (3.1%); within your capabilities 46 (71.9%); easy 14 (21.9%); and too easy 2 (3.1%).

At fifteen weeks students were asked to indicate the grade they expected to earn in their writing course. All of them, 64 (100%), expected to achieve at least a grade of C in their course. The individual student responses were as follows: grade of A 23 (36%); grade of B 33 (51.5%); grade of C 8 (12.5%).

Overall, the survey data were consistent at 6 and 15 weeks. The slight differences in percentages were in proportion to the frequencies of responses. The only notable variance in the responses was related to how prepared students were for the assignments in the course. At 6 weeks, the survey indicated there were 45 (51.1%) students adequately prepared and 22 (25%) students very prepared in comparison to 15 weeks when there were 25 (39.1%) students adequately prepared and 27 (42.2%) very prepared. As the semester progressed, more students felt very prepared for the course. Of the 10 students, identified in Table 3, who were not in agreement with another placement indicator, 9 of them (90%) were satisfied or very satisfied with their final course placement decision.

#### Satisfaction Measures

Students indicated at two points in the semester their satisfaction with their writing course placement. Using a five-point Likert scale, the satisfaction ratings

ranged from “very dissatisfied” to “very satisfied.” The Pearson product-moment correlation statistical function was performed on the Likert responses using SPSS. A  $p$  value of  $< .01$  was set to determine significance of the results. A moderate relationship existed between the students’ satisfaction ratings at approximately 6 and 15 weeks in the fall semester;  $r(59) = .524$ .

Selected faculty also rated their satisfaction with the students’ course placement (Appendix E). Six faculty members, who participated in the interviews, rated 28 students for the independent analysis using the same Likert responses. Eleven students (39.3%) were in exact agreement with the faculty rating. Twenty-four of the students (85.7%) were either in exact agreement or indicated an adjacent response.

Faculty interviews revealed they preferred using multiple writing assessments to place students in at least the developmental writing courses; SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I and SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II. They indicated using only one assessment, such as the COMPASS test or an essay, does not appropriately place all students. Four of the faculty specifically indicated it would be beneficial for all students to complete a supplemental writing sample. One faculty member stated, “The COMPASS test, I think, does an adequate job, but it may not be 100% efficient.” Another faculty member added, “I like what we are doing now (both assessments) with having writing in addition to just the COMPASS test. We have found not just with writing, but with other classes too, depending on how students feel at that time, or just other things in general, it seems like it doesn’t always tell us how well they can do.” There can be other factors that influence the success of some students as indicated by

this Composition I professor, “I would go so far as to say that after a certain point (for some students), the results of the COMPASS and other academic-oriented placement tests are almost irrelevant. The proper motivation and proper work ethic determines if the student is going to pass or fail.” The self-directed writing prompt allows for students to express non-cognitive or affective factors in learning as well as course placement.

Several of the faculty members participated in the essay reading sessions so they were quite familiar with the writing prompt and the placement essays. One professor stated,

I think this writing prompt does a much better job of sorting students out than anything we’ve used in the past. It focuses on what we want them to talk about a little better maybe. We thought we had awfully good prompts in the past, but it seems like every time we had a prompt there was someone who would go way off on a tangent that we didn’t expect and that was very hard, I think, to rate them. Where this (prompt) gives me more critical thinking skills they have to use to base their choice on, which I think is very good. It helps me as an instructor and the rest of the teachers I’ve talked to think it worked really well.

A second faculty member also supported the use of the self-directed writing prompt as she mentioned, “I think that this one (prompt) is the best one we’ve used yet. They actually write about where they think they should be.” The writing prompts used prior to this one, asked students to “write about a job you’ve had.... We’ve had kind of general prompts that didn’t address their own writing ability. They knew they were getting tested on it, but by actually having them focus on how they write, I think, it really brings out their ability to write.”

The faculty provided several improvements to make better use of their time. They thought it would be “less of a hassle” and provide “less of a stigma” if the writing prompt was administered prior to registration for all students. One professor stated, “There is less of a stigma about being switched or anything. We’ve had some problems in the past. So I feel that this (essay before registration) is very beneficial.” The faculty also shared they preferred to use their time for instruction instead of addressing potential placement issues. One faculty member stated, “It actually takes almost the whole first week – getting people in the right course, so that puts us behind.” Completing the writing sample on the first day of class seemed to be inconvenient for students and the faculty. “I thought it would be nice if all testing could be done before school starts in any given semester. I just think it’s nice to be able to work with students, get acquainted, .... and not have to do the writing prompt. The first day or two seems kind of not structured.” Another professor indicated, “I think that it adds to the stress level that the students are already dealing with especially if they are first year students.”

#### Student Essays

The 201 essays were analyzed by the researcher for textual data to determine if there were any identifiable patterns or themes within the essays. Five themes emerged: level of self-confidence, student motivation, work experiences, value involvement, and off topic responses.

### Level of Self-Confidence

High level of confidence. The essays were grouped based on the students' confidence in their writing abilities. A high level of self-confidence in one's writing ability suggested a high level of self-efficacy and a low level of apprehension. High efficacious writers are confident about their writing ability and skills (Reynolds, 2003). The students who were the most confident and meta-cognitively aware of their writing abilities were able to articulate elements of the writing process and describe how they acquired that knowledge through persuasive topic statements to support their thesis statement. These students typically selected Composition I as their preferred course placement. In addition, most of these students defended their positions using persuasive words or phrases such as "I'm confident, I have a high or fairly high writing ability, I have little difficulty or I need to be further challenged." Such confidence was expressed as one student wrote,

The writing course that I believe would best fit for me would be Composition I. I believe this because I have had experiences writing many lengths of papers, one of which included an eight to twelve page paper on a controversial issue. Along with the experience of writing many papers I have also been exposed to documenting sources. Forms of documentation I have learned were MLA and AP style. My area of strengths would be my understanding of what is happening within a story, forms of documentation, what needs to be within a paper and how to make it better. My areas of improvement would have to be grammar, spelling and punctuation. Although I do not have a horrible time at these three items I could use a little work. My main problem would be double checking over my work for punctuation errors.

The ease of writing compound sentences boosted the confidence of this student as she wrote the following quote:

My ability of writing, I believe is fairly high. I can make complete and

compound sentences very easily. Along with those aspects, spelling also comes very easy to me. In my senior year, the class taught much on the step of editing.

Several students asserted their confidence in terms of needing a challenge as one student stated, "This is one of the primary reasons why I believe I should be placed in Composition I; to challenge myself to stay organized. If I do that, I'm confident that the grades I know I'm capable of will follow." Another student wrote,

In high school, I had multi-paragraph essays due weekly and I think those have prepared me for a more advanced writing class. I have always considered myself to be a strong reader and writer..... I think Composition I would challenge and sharpen my abilities. I don't want to be stagnant in a class. I'm sure that any of the classes offered would help me, but I don't want to just "coast" through a class. Composition I gives me a great opportunity to apply myself to work instead of becoming stale.

I am confident that I am ready for Composition I. Besides having essays due weekly, I also had monthly essays due about historical figures and American literature. I was also involved in speech at .... and performed at the all-state level with a speech I had written myself..... I hope that I'm considered for Composition I. My preparation, dedication, and desire make me sure that I'm ready for this class.

Average level of confidence. Most of the students who had an average level of self-confidence had some meta-cognitive awareness of the writing process, but they did not seem to articulate elements within the process as strongly or clearly. In addition, these students did not share as much about their prior learning activities to justify their selection. Most of these students defended their positions using words or phrases such as "I'm an average writer." These students typically selected Fundamentals of Writing II for their preferred course placement. For example:

I consider myself between an average writer to a fairly strong writer. I have my weaknesses and my strengths. I have problems with spelling,

grammar and punctuation. I also feel that I can write down what I intend to say. Overall I feel that I can not just sit down and write it perfect with few mistakes. The process of writing a paper takes me longer.

One student revealed his awareness of the writing process and confidence as depicted by this quote,

I don't consider myself to be a good writer. My weakness in writing are grammar and mechanics. I don't fully understand where commas are supposed to be placed and things of that nature. My strengths in writing are comprehension and organization. .... I do think that the best choice would be fundamentals of writing II because I am not that good at writing, but I am not terrible at it. It seems like an average writing class.

Some students preferred to refresh their skills if they had been out of school for awhile or if they had not used the skills acquired during high school. A non-traditional student stated,

I have been out of school for 20 years and feel that I need a course to refresh my confidence. .... I consider myself an average writer, that requires practice. English was one of my better subjects in school, but considering the length of time I've been out of school, the lack of practice and even speaking, using correct grammar, I know that some type of review will better my self-esteem and work performance in any class.

Low level of confidence. The students who exhibited a low level of self-confidence did not appear to understand the fundamental rules of writing and typically were unable to define elements of the writing process. Most of these students defended their positions using words or phrases such as "I've never been good, I have no writing ability, or I'm a poor writer." One student revealed his low level of confidence by describing a situation that occurred in his high school writing class,

Fundamentals of Writing I will do me some good because I've never been a good speller or a good reader in my lifetime. I did take a writing class in high school but when I stop on a word that I didn't understand I froze for a min or two then the teacher said the word for

me if I asked what that word meant so I can understand more about the word..... and it didn't help with people picking on me for not knowing that word or came up on a word that is why my writing is so poor.

Another student identified her level of confidence by expressing her need for the fundamentals of the writing process. She does not identify any writing skills as her strengths. She stated,

My strengths are just writing about sports or a topic that I get to choose. Some things that I need to work on are spelling and putting commas where they need to go. I need to work on not combining a lot of stuff into one sentence. I don't understand some of the rules of grammar and punctuation.

Another student identified her level of confidence by revealing her need to become organized. In addition, she did not identify any strengths in her writing. She wrote, "My weakness I am not always good at expressing myself on paper. Sometimes it is a mixture of thoughts and ideas which end up a confusing mess. I also am weak in the area of putting it all together in a strong essay form." A final student is quite persuasive in articulating his course selection,

So if I take a writing course I need fundamental of writing I. I need to improve everywhere. I feel that I don't have a writer ability! I find it boring! So hopefully you all can change that. My writing style is no writing for me please!

### Student Motivation

Since the 1980's, the classroom has shifted to become a more learner-centered environment. Svinicki (1999) postulates that the learner-centered environment includes a blend of constructivism, self-regulation, and motivation. Specific non-cognitive behaviors, such as student motivation, can impact one's academic performance. One student wrote about how her need to be challenged, "The reason for me choosing



Composition over the other classes is that I am always trying to better myself by taking a challenge. I want to push myself by taking a class that is not too easy for me, but one that I need to try and focus on.”

There are often people who influence one’s motivation as revealed by this student, “My father once told me “if it isn’t a challenge it isn’t learning. Those wise words are why I feel the Composition I writing course is best for me.” Another student expressed his emotion in his essay, “Composition I is a class that excites me. I am ready for to challenge myself on a higher level.” Some students strive to be role models for their children as depicted by this student, “My wife and I are consistently after the boys to do their best in school. Therefore I plan to show them it can be done.” Another student is motivated by values that were instilled by her mother as she quotes, “My mother told me that in order to win you must put God first and put both feet firmly on the ground. And never give up. And that is what I intend on doing!”

### Work Experiences

Work experiences outside the classroom effect one’s academic abilities and how knowledge is constructed. Several non-traditional students articulated some of their work experiences or lack of training to support their course selections. This non-traditional learner wrote about the writing style he adopted in the military,

I have found that my writing skills have steadily declines since leaving high school. After high school I joined the Marine Corps. After 8 years in the Marine Corps I started to write in a shorthand we used. I gradually transferred that style of writing to my own style.

Some non-traditional students secure employment immediately after high school and use their writing skills fairly regularly. This non-traditional student wrote, “I have

written numerous essays while in high school, and I have also been an active participant in the newsletter produced by my co-workers at my last job I held. I believe firmly that Composition I would provide me a challenge I relish, as well as enable me to showcase my ability to a slightly keener eye.” Another student wrote, “By being a non-traditional student, I feel I have the basic writing skills that you might receive in the fundamentals classes. On a daily basis I am required to write for my job. In my writing I need to think through the process to who will read my paper, as well as, how I want that person to interupit my paper.”

#### Value Involvement

Several students expressed gratitude for allowing them to be more involved in the placement process. One student wrote, “With that I will now close with a Thank you for giving me an opportunity to explain my thoughts.” Along the same lines a student merely closed her essay with, “Thank you for the chance to explain my point.” One student also expressed an understanding of how important time is for faculty as she wrote, “Thank you for both the opportunity to express myself and for your precious time.” Taking it a step further, another student was persuasive in addition to being grateful for the opportunity to express herself as revealed by the following quote, “Thank you for understanding why Fundamentals of Writing II is for me and for allowing me to write to you.”

#### Off Topic Responses

The majority of the students (98.5%) were able to select and defend which course they thought would best fit their writing abilities. Even though the level of

competencies varied among the students, most of them were aware of their writing ability, self-selected a course, and defended their position.

Three students did not write about their course preference or identify any of their specific writing strengths and areas of improvement. These three essays were completely off-topic. While the information was insightful and assisted in their course placement they were initially unable to articulate which writing course was their preference. For example the first student wrote, "I need help in making the correct decision on what courses I plan to take, also I need a counselor to go over my financial aid package and to get all the document and information I need to be successful in the course I want to take, I also....." The second student wrote about wanting to take business courses instead of concentrating on which writing course he needs to take in his Business Administration program. He wrote, "The class I'm thinking of is Business Management because I want to own my own business someday." The final student wrote about her life experiences in another country, "In my country I graduated radio communications. I had been working at ...." All of these students were recommended to take Fundamentals of Writing I; however only one of them enrolled at the College.

#### Independent Analysis

Data compiled from the placement indicators, student essays, student placement surveys, and faculty interviews allowed for the triangulation of data and incorporated multiple assessment measures to add breadth to the study. Comparisons between the COMPASS writing test and the self-directed essay were based on pre-determined cut-score ranges. The independent analysis identified that agreement among all three

placement indicators would result in an appropriate course placement. In addition, any combination of two placement indicators should also result in an appropriate course placement. These students were expected to adequately meet the demands of the course. Table 5 describes the course placement data for the 28 students, 47.4% of the students who completed both surveys, who were selected for the independent analysis. The students were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Table 5

*Independent Analysis: Course Placement Data\**

	COMPASS Score	Essay Rating	Self-Placement Preference
Student	(1-100)	(1-6)	(1-3)
Mark	35	2	1
Amanda	14	2	2
Bob	33	5	3
Wanda	28	3	1
Carin	20	2	1
Ben	26	1	1
Todd	22	2	1
Jaime	17	2	2
Avery	6	1	1
Brian	27	4	3
Eric	51	2	3
Lenny	60	3	2
Natalie	56	3	1
Nathan	51	4	2
Kari	15	4	3
Emily	58	6	3
Raymond	51	3	2
Logan	60	2	2
Michael	47	4	3
Kathy	22	3	1
Rick	85	5	3
Mary	61	5	3
Chuck	74	5	2
Nate	94	5	3
Andrew	69	4	2
Steve	41	6	3
Jerry	79	4	1
Mel	99	2	1

Note.\* N=28

Characterized as a low placement, a score of 1 or 2 on the essay and between 20 and 40 on the COMPASS writing test indicated both measures place students into SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I. Students who scored a 3 or 4 on the essay and between 41 and 64 on COMPASS indicated both measures place students into SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II; a moderate level placement. Students who scored a 5 or 6 on the essay and above a 65 on COMPASS, the highest placement, place in CM: 113T Composition I. Student course preferences were assigned a numeric value at the onset of this study. These included the following values: SC:015 Fundamentals of Writing I was assigned numeral 1, SC:017D Fundamentals of Writing II was assigned numeral 2 and CM:113T Composition I was assigned numeral 3.

To make comparisons, the student and faculty satisfaction ratings were illustrated in Table 6. The satisfaction ratings ranged from “very dissatisfied” to “very satisfied”, 1-5 points respectively. Very satisfied and satisfied ratings indicated students were appropriately placed into their writing courses. In the event there was not satisfaction agreement between the student and faculty, appropriate placement was determined using the faculty rating. The faculty determined three students were inappropriately placed into their writing courses, even though two of the students (Wanda and Kari) were very satisfied with their placements and one student (Bob) was undecided about his placements. Within this analysis, students were categorized based on their course placement indicator(s).

Table 6

*Independent Analysis: Satisfaction Data\**

	Student Satisfaction 6 Weeks	Student Satisfaction 15 Weeks	Faculty Satisfaction 15 Weeks
Student	(1-5)	(1-5)	(1-5)
Mark	4	4	4
Amanda	4	4	5
Bob	3	3	2
Wanda	5	5	2
Carin	5	5	4
Ben	4	5	4
Todd	5	5	4
Jaime	4	5	4
Avery	4	4	4
Brian	5	3	5
Eric	4	4	4
Lenny	5	5	4
Natalie	3	4	4
Nathan	4	4	5
Kari	4	5	2
Emily	3	3	4
Raymond	5	5	5
Logan	4	4	4
Michael	3	2	4
Kathy	5	5	4
Rick	4	4	4
Mary	4	5	4
Chuck	5	5	5
Nate	5	5	5
Andrew	4	5	5
Steve	5	5	5
Jerry	4	4	5
Mel	4	5	4

Note.\* N=28

After reviewing the accumulation of placement data for the students in this analysis (placement indicators, self-directed essay content, survey results, and faculty perceptions), they were classified as being appropriately or not appropriately placed in their writing courses. Appropriate placement was based on the faculty's satisfaction of the course placement; very satisfied (5) or satisfied (4). Three of the 28 students (10.7%) were inappropriately placed into their courses. All of the students who used at least two placement indicators were appropriately placed in their courses with the exception of one student who was identified as having a poor level of confidence.

The placement indicators, separately or in combination, provided descriptive data to support an appropriate or inappropriate placement. The following analysis was categorized based on the student course placement indicators (COMPASS score, essay rating, and student preference). Within each category, the students were organized starting with the lowest level course; SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I. Information was also provided to distinguish the non-traditional from the traditional age students for comparison purposes. Six of the 22 non-traditional students (27.3%) were included in his analysis. This in-depth analysis provided the advisors, counselors, and faculty with a better understanding of the course placements to assist them with student registration. In addition, the description of the data had instructional value. If the faculty received a copy of the essays they could incorporate this knowledge into the students' portfolios.

The first section of the analysis focused on 19 students who selected their courses using at least two placement indicators. Eighteen students were appropriately



placed while one student, Wanda, was inappropriately placed using her COMPASS score and self preference. A description of each placement follows:

COMPASS/Essay/Student Preference

All of the placement indicators were in agreement for 9 students in this independent analysis.

Appropriate placement. Nine students were appropriately placed in their courses using all three placement indicators. Appropriate placement was defined as the faculty perception that the student had adequate writing skills consistent with the demands of the course (satisfaction rating 4 or 5). A description of each placement follows:

Student #1: Mark was a 19 year-old, traditional student who enrolled in SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I. His essay received a low rating; a 2. He wrote in his placement essay "I cannot use grammar very well. I do know some but, I am not very good." His essay consisted of nine short sentences within two paragraphs. The essay was repetitious and had a weak thesis statement.

Mark and his professor both were satisfied with his placement (rating 4). Mark felt he was adequately prepared for the course and the assignments were within his capabilities. At 6 weeks he expected to earn a grade of A in the course, but he slightly adjusted his grade to a "B" at 15 weeks. His instructor indicated, "He has good ideas, just has trouble expressing them sometimes in complete sentences. I've seen a lot of improvement in him from the beginning in terms of that specifically."

Student #2: Carin was a 28 year-old, non-traditional student who enrolled in SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I. Carin received a low essay rating; a 2. She wrote in her placement essay, "And while in high school I didn't read or write much and tried to avoid taking a class where I would have to read or write." Even though Carin avoided these types of classes in high school, she matured and realized that she had the motivation to be successful in college. She wrote in her essay "But I do think if I put my mind to it I can do it." Carin's essay was also very short consisting of one paragraph with four longer sentences.

Carin was very satisfied (rating 5) with her course placement, felt she was adequately prepared for the class, and believed the assignments were within her capability. She expected to earn an A at 6 and 15 weeks into the course. Carin's professor was satisfied (rating 4) with her placement. She stated, "She was probably about the same as Mark. Just some sentence problems such as run-ons and fragments, mostly. First drafts of her essays tended to be a little short.... needed some direction on how to add more information to her essays."

Student #3: Ben was an 18 year-old, traditional student who enrolled in SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I. The faculty rated his essay extremely low; a 1. Ben's self-placement essay was the shortest of all the 201 essays as it consisted of two sentences. He wrote, "I think that the best class for me to take would be Fundamentals of Writing I. The reason that I think this is because I am able to write ok and this would be the best for me to take." Ben's essay clearly had an extremely weak thesis

statement; almost non-existent. In addition, he did not have topic statements to justify his self-selection.

Ben indicated on his placement survey he was satisfied (rating 4) with his course placement at 6 weeks and very satisfied (rating 5) at 15 weeks into the course. He felt he was somewhat prepared for the course and the assignments were within his capabilities. At 6 weeks he expected to earn a grade of A and this prediction was slightly adjusted to a grade of B at 15 weeks. The professor was satisfied (rating 4) with his course placement. She indicated Ben was typical of a student in her course as he also had difficulty with run-on and fragmented sentences. I quote, "Pretty much the same thing, (problems with) run-ons, fragments, and not being able to generate enough material."

Student #4: Todd was an 18 year-old, traditional student. He also enrolled in SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I based on the recommendation of the assessment indicators. The faculty rated his essay with a low score; a 2. Todd's essay consisted of four long sentences with spelling, grammatical, and punctuation errors; however, he did identify his strengths and weakness as topic statements to defend his thesis. For example: he wrote, "One of my strenghts are paraphrasing or drawing meaning of the essay that we are reading."

Todd was very satisfied (rating 5) with his course placement at both points in time. His perception was that he was very prepared for the assignments, which were within his capability. At 6 and 15 weeks he expected to earn an A in the course. His professor was satisfied (rating 4) with his course placement. "He had no problem

generating material. His essays reached longer than they needed to be but again, the run-ons and the fragments were a problem and punctuation.”

Student #5: Raymond was a 27 year-old, non-traditional student who enrolled in SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II. The faculty rated his essay with a moderate score; a 3. Raymond’s essay was concise, two average length paragraphs. He expressed his level of confidence and need for some review since he has been out of school for some time. Raymond wrote, “I feel that I have confidence in what I want to say and how I would like to say it. I believe that I would do well in Composition I, but I think it would be better to have a refresher course such as Fundamentals of Writing II to insure my success in Composition I.”

At 6 and 15 weeks Raymond was very satisfied (rating 5) with his course placement. He felt very prepared for the course and that the assignments were within his capabilities. At six weeks, he expected to earn a grade of B; however, at fifteen weeks he expected to earn an “A.” His professor was also very satisfied (rating 5) with his course placement as he stated Raymond was “very well placed.”

Student #6: Lenny was a 43 year-old, non-traditional student who enrolled in SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II. His essay received a moderate rating; a 3. In his essay, Lenny was able to write a multi-paragraph essay defined with a thesis statement and weak topic statements to support his decision. Lenny expressed little confident in his writing ability in his placement essay. “In my educational background, I have not used my writing skills very often, and Therefore I am not feeling very confident about my writing, and more importantly; my punctuation skills.” Lenny also

expressed his gratitude to the faculty for taking the time to read his essay and offer feedback to assist with his placement. His quote, "I look forward to your feedback on this matter, and any advise that you may have for me.... Thanks for your time!"

His placement surveys indicated he was very satisfied (rating 5) with his placement. Lenny also indicated he was adequately prepared for the assignments at 6 weeks and very prepared at 15 weeks into the course. He expressed the assignments were within his capabilities and he expected to achieve an "A" in the course. His professor was satisfied (rating 4) with his course placement. She indicated he "had trouble with the conventions of English", but over all he "did quite well for being out of school for a long time." Lenny had the "ability to produce good ideas based on his experiences, which was tremendous."

Student #7: Nathan was an 18 year-old, traditional student who enrolled in SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II based on the recommendations from the placement indicators. Nathan's essay was rated a moderate score; a 4. His essay was multi-paragraph, as directed by the writing prompt, had a thesis statement and weak topic statements. Nathan also identified an introduction and conclusion in his essay. He wrote in his essay that he felt he was an average writer although his quote was more descriptive. He stated, "One other reason why I feel this way, is that I think I'm at a higher level than the Fundamentals of Writing I and even though I'd like to go ahead and take Composition I, it's a little out of my league." He also thanked the faculty for taking the time to read his essay. Nathan indicated he was satisfied (rating 4) with his course placement.

Nathan felt he was adequately prepared for the assignments and that they were within his capabilities. Nathan expected to earn a grade of a B in the course. His professor was very satisfied (rating 5) with his course placement. I quote, "He is a gifted writer. I'm sure that the reason he got in this course is because of his problems with punctuation and spelling."

Student #8: Nate was an 18 year-old, traditional student who enrolled in CM: 113T Composition I. The faculty rating his essay with a high level placement; a 5. In his placement essay he indicated he was confident in his writing ability. He wrote, "I do like writing. I find it to be interesting for the most part, and one of my stronger areas. I've found that essays were not that difficult for me in high school." He was able to use supporting topic statements for each paragraph and justify his course selection/thesis.

Nate and his professor were very satisfied (rating 5) with his course placement. They both felt the assignments were within his capabilities. At 6 weeks in the semester Nate indicated he was adequately prepared for the assignment but at 15 weeks he felt very prepared. Nate anticipated earning an "A" in the course. His professor stated, "He's a strong student who's good at completing the assignments."

Student #9: Rick was an 18 year-old, traditional age student who enrolled in CM: 113T Composition I. His essay received a high placement rating; a 5. He portrayed a high level of confidence in his writing ability within his essay. "One of my strongest areas when I took the ITED test was sentence structures." Rick used topic statements to support his thesis.

He indicated he was satisfied (rating 4) with his course placement. His professor also agreed with this rating but based solely on his writing ability. He had the ability to pass the course if he put forth the effort and regularly attended. If the professor was able to rate him on other measures, such as effort and attendance, he would rate him as dissatisfied with his placement. His professor's greatest concern with Rick's participation in class was not "so much a problem with his technical writing ability but the lack of motivation as the semester progressed." According to his professor, Rick did not turn in any of his assignments after October 3<sup>rd</sup>. Rick indicated on his placement surveys he was very prepared for the assignments and they were within his capabilities. At 6 weeks and again at 15 weeks, he anticipated earning a grade of A in the Composition I course.

#### COMPASS/Essay

Four students in this independent analysis selected their writing courses based on a combination of their COMPASS test scores and essay ratings.

Appropriate placement. Four students were appropriately placed in their courses using their COMPASS score and essay rating. Appropriate placement was defined as the faculty perception that the student had adequate writing skills consistent with the demands of the course. A description of each placement follows:

Student #1: Eric was an 18 year-old, traditional student enrolled in SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II. His essay was rated a low placement score; a 2. Eric preferred to schedule for CM: 113T Composition I, but it was clear his essay had a weak thesis statement and his topic statements needed some polishing. His essay

consisted of two paragraphs that had numerous punctuation and spelling errors which distracted from its focus. Eric was aware of his spelling difficulties as he wrote, "I like writing essay's. The only problem I have is spelling but, that is why penciles have erasers, and why they invented spell check." He portrayed a level of confidence in his abilities as well. I quote, "I never had a problem wrighting several papers or essay's at the same time."

Eric's survey responses are identical at both 6 and 15 weeks. He was satisfied (rating 4) with his course placement, felt very prepared for the course, the assignments were easy, and he expected to earn an "A." His professor also was satisfied (rating 4) with his placement into her course. She indicated,

He needs some assistance with his writing. His first drafts always needed work on them. I think he would have been bored in Fundamentals of Writing I, but I don't think he was quite ready for Comp. He is fairly mature in his thinking and was able to follow directions for the assignments, as well as produce pretty good text.

Student #2: Natalie was 26 years-old, a non-traditional student. She enrolled in SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II even though she preferred SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I. Natalie's essay was rated a moderate score; a 3. Her essay consisted of four paragraphs; an introduction, body, and a weak conclusion. Natalie was able to articulate her strengths and weakness to support her thesis. She stated her weakness as "not having a strong essay form."

Her survey responses at six weeks suggested she was unsure of her level of satisfaction with course placement as she responded with undecided (rating 3). She felt somewhat prepared for the course, but thought the assignments were within her



capabilities. She also indicated she expected to earn a “B” in the course. At 15 weeks her overall perception changed as she felt satisfied (rating 4) with her placement even though she expected to earn a “C” in the course. Natalie’s professor was also satisfied (rating 4) with her course placement. She indicated “she wasn’t ready for Composition I as she really needed some review of writing conventions and review writing forms.”

Student #3: Michael was a 20 year-old, traditional student enrolled in SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II even though he preferred to take CM: 113T Composition I. The faculty rated his essay with a moderate score; a 4. His essay consisted of two paragraphs with a weak thesis statement. His topic statement stated that he is indecisive, but at the end of his essay he was convinced he should take Composition I. Michael wrote, “I feel that I am somewhere in between the range of fundamentals of writing II and composition I..... I feel I am above Fundamentals of Writing II. I also have been out of school for a year, so that might hurt me.”

At 6 weeks, Michael indicated on his course placement survey he was undecided (rating 3) about his placement. He felt very prepared for the course, the assignments were easy, and he would earn an “A” in the course. At 15 weeks, he rated his course placement as dissatisfied (rating 2). His professor felt he was appropriately placed and rated his placement as satisfied (rating 4). She stated, “The first few writes I thought he was a little shaky, but has done very well. We had an ad analysis that we did just recently.... and he did very well on that. That was the toughest paper we’ve had to write.”

Student #4: Chuck was a non-traditional, 29 year-old student, who enrolled in CM: 113T Composition I. His essay was rated a high score; a 5. Chuck incorporated some of his life experiences since his high school graduation in his essay. After serving 8 years in the military his perception was his writing skills declined. In the military he used shorthand which he “gradually transferred that style of writing” to his own. In reviewing his essay, it is clear that he had a fairly strong writing ability. He articulated a strong thesis within his introductory paragraph and he used three supporting paragraphs each with a topic statement to defend his position. While he lacked a well defined conclusion, the writing faculty supported his participation in CM: 113T Composition I over his preferred course SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II.

Chuck’s responses to his survey were consistent. He was very satisfied (rating 5) with his course placement, felt very prepared for the course, the assignments were within his capabilities, and he expected to earn an ‘A.’ His professor was also very pleased with Chuck’s abilities and performance in the class. His professor was very satisfied (rating 5) with his abilities, motivation to succeed, and participation. I quote his professor, “Chad was always forth coming with his work and spent a substantial amount of time out of class (on his assignments). His note taking and level of conscientiousness were excellent. I’m a great admirer of him and attribute this to his work experience.”

#### Essay/Student Preference

Four students in this independent analysis selected their writing courses based on their essay rating and preferred course placement.

Appropriate placement. Four students were appropriately placed in their writing course based on their essay rating and preferred self placement. Appropriate placement was defined as the faculty perception that the student had adequate writing skills consistent with the demands of the course.

Student #1: Avery was 18 year-old English as a Second Language (ESL) student, traditional age, who enrolled in SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I. He scored quite low on the COMPASS test; a 6 and achieved the lowest essay rating; a 1. Avery's essay consisted of four short sentences in one paragraph. His essay was not clear and had grammatical and punctuation errors. His survey responses indicated he was satisfied (rating 4) with his course placement. At the sixth week he felt he was adequately prepared for the assignments in the course, but he thought the assignments were difficult. He expected to earn a grade of C at the end of the course. At the fifteenth week, his perception changed slightly as he felt very prepared, the assignments were within his capabilities, and he expected to earn a B grade. Avery's professor was also satisfied (rating 4) with his course placement. I quote, "I think his main problem was that English was not his first language. But in comparison to other students, he was much better at it. He had some difficulties with punctuation and just order of words in sentences."

Student #2: Emily was an 18 year-old, traditional student who enrolled in SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II. The faculty readers gave her the highest essay rating; a 6. Her multi-paragraph essay clearly contained an introduction, body, and conclusion. In addition, each paragraph within the body described a reason (topic

statement) to support her decision. For instance she wrote, "The first reason that I should take Composition I, is because during my senior year in high school I took Advanced Composition. During this course we were taught....." Throughout her essay she was confident in her writing ability as she stated, "I have never had a hard time through any writing classes that I've taken till this point, so I believe I can handle the obstacles of composition I ...."

Emily's survey responses revealed she was undecided (rating 3) with her course placement at both points in time. She indicated she was over-prepared for the course at 6 weeks but very prepared at 15 weeks. Emily perceived the assignments to be too easy and expected to earn an "A" in the course. Her professor was satisfied with her course placement (rating 4). She stated, "She seemed to be doing quite well, followed directions."

Student #3: Mary was 19 years-old, traditional age, and enrolled in CM: 113T Composition I. The faculty rated her essay with a high level placement; a 5. Her multi-paragraph also clearly contained an introduction, body, and conclusion. Mary stated a thesis and supported her decision with several examples of her abilities. Mary maintained a high school "grade point average of 3.0 to 3.5"... and is "comfortable with the different skills involved with writing a good, well written paper."

At 6 weeks into the course, Mary was satisfied (rating 4) with her course placement. She felt very prepared for the course assignments, felt they were within her capabilities, and anticipated earning a "B" in the class. At 15 weeks, her perception changed slightly as she indicated she was very satisfied (rating 5) with the course even

though she expected to receive a grade of C. Her professor was also satisfied (rating 4) with her writing ability; however if she was rated based on her attendance she would be rated lower. Her attendance was poor and the professor was unsure if there was a reason.

Student #4: Steve was a 22 year-old, traditional student who enrolled in CM: 113T Composition I. His COMPASS writing score of 41 just made him eligible to take SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II; however his essay rating was impressive. His essay received the highest rating; a 6. Even though he graduated four years earlier from high school, his essay was comprised of strong topic statements to support this thesis. Steve spent several years in another country helping other students learn English. This experienced helped him to learn more about the rules of the English written language. He concluded his essay with "Thank you for taking the time to read my essay. I hope that you learned a little about me and who I am."

Steve's survey responses were consistent in describing his perception of his course placement. He indicated he was very satisfied (rating 5) with his course placement, was very prepared for the assignments, the assignments were within his capabilities, and he expected to earn an A. His professor was also pleased with his course placement as she also rated the placement as very satisfied (rating 5). "He's very organized. He always, like will say, in conclusion or let me start by saying. So he's really clear."

### COMPASS/Student Preference

Two students in this independent analysis selected their courses based on their COMPASS test scores and preferred self-placement.

Appropriate placement. One student was appropriately placed in their courses. Appropriate placement was defined as the faculty perception that the student had adequate writing skills consistent with the demands of the course. A description of the placement follows:

Student #1: Logan was a 19 year-old, traditional student who enrolled in SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II. According to the faculty raters, his essay placed him in SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I as he received a low score; a 2. His placement essay consisted of four sentences in two paragraphs. There was a very weak thesis statement and one weak topic statement that defended his placement decision.

Logan's survey responses were consistent with the exception of his anticipated final grade. He was satisfied (rating 4) with his placement, felt adequately prepared for the assignments and they were within his capabilities. At 6 weeks, he expected to earn a grade of A in the course, but at 15 weeks his expectations dropped to a "B." His professor was also satisfied (rating 4) with his course placement. She stated, "I worried about him a little bit at the beginning, but he really came around as a very, very decent writer."

Inappropriate placement. One student was inappropriately placed into her course using her COMPASS test score and her course preference. Inappropriate placement was defined as the faculty perception that the student had inadequate or too

advanced writing skills that were inconsistent with the demands of the course. A description of her placement follows:

Student #2: Wanda is a 27 year-old, non-traditional student who enrolled in SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I. Her essay received a moderate rating; a 3. She wrote a fairly lengthy essay, but there were several spelling errors that detracted from the weak thesis statement. Wanda's word selection suggested she had little confidence in her writing ability as she wrote, "I believe that the best course for me to take at this time will be Fundamentals of Writing I, as I did not so well in school, and am not comfortable yet with my writing abilities." She also stated that she would take as many courses as she needed to be successful. She wrote, "I feel that it is in Hawkeyes best interest, as well as my own, to take the Fundamentals course, as I do not want to waist this schools, an my time. I am serious about my education, and bettering my life, and ....."

Her survey responses indicated she was very satisfied (rating 5) with her course placement. At 6 weeks, Wanda indicated she was somewhat prepared for the course, but by 15 weeks she was very prepared. She consistently responded that the assignments were within her abilities and she expected to achieve an "A" in the course.

Wanda's professor felt she was inappropriately placed based on her writing ability as she rated the placement as dissatisfied (rating 2). Her professor would have recommended that Wanda take Fundamentals of Writing II as she "had no problem with content and was very self-motivated. If she had a problem with her writing she'd go and get help in Academic Support." The professor also expressed that Wanda had a

poor level of confidence in her writing and this is why she self-selected Fundamentals of Writing I. I quote, “If she (Wanda) would have been given a choice, I’m sure that she would have stayed in Fundamentals of Writing I because of her little confidence in her writing. She is much better than she gives herself credit for.”

The second section of the analysis focused on 9 students who selected their courses using only one placement indicator. Seven of these students were appropriately placed in their course. Two students, Kari and Bob, were inappropriately placed using one indicator. Kari selected her course based on her essay rating, while Bob selected his course based on his COMPASS score. A description of each placement follows:

#### Essay

Five students in this independent analysis selected their courses based on their essay rating.

Appropriate placement. Four students were appropriately placed in their writing course. Appropriate placement was defined as the faculty perception that the student had adequate writing skills consistent with the demands of the course. A description of each placement follows:

Student #1: Jamie was 19 years-old, traditional age, and enrolled in SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I. Her essay received a low rating; a 2. Jamie’s essay indicated she preferred her course placement to begin with SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II; although her essay and COMPASS score; a 17, recommend a lower placement. Her essay was comprised of a very weak thesis statement and a weak topic statement within the paragraph. Her topic statement was not very supportive of her



decision as she stated “For my senior year I chose advanced composition. I will be honest there were a lot of things I didn’t understand.” Jamie does not reveal her strengths and is unable to specifically identify her weaknesses. Based on the previous quote, one could conclude she does not understand the fundamental skills of writing.

Her survey responses indicated at 6 weeks she is satisfied (rating 4) with her placement. She felt adequately prepared for the assignments that were within her capabilities. Jamie expected to earn an “A.” At 15 weeks, she slightly adjusted her perceptions as she was very satisfied (rating 5) with her placement even though she felt that she would achieve a grade of a B. Her professor was satisfied (rating 4) with the placement as well. She indicated, “Her essays tended to be short. Also, she was not able to generate the ideas in terms of content and punctuation.”

Student #2: Amanda was an 18 year-old, traditional age student who enrolled in SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I. Amanda’s essay received a low rating; a 2. Her essay and placement mirrored Jamie’s as they both preferred to take SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II, but Amanda had even a lower COMPASS score; a 14. Her one paragraph essay was very weak; however she did receive an essay rating of 2. She had a very weak thesis statement and was lacking supportive descriptions of her ability.

Her survey responses were consistent at 6 and 15 weeks into her course. Amanda was satisfied with her course placement (rating 4), felt adequately prepared for the assignments, and expected to achieve a grade of B in the course. The only inconsistent response was at 6 weeks as she felt the assignments were within her capabilities and at fifteen weeks she found them easy. Her professor was very satisfied

(rating 5) with Amanda's course placement. She believed she definitely needed the course to build her skills to be successful in future writing courses. Her professor indicated, "I don't think she proofreads well. She, again, has good ideas..... a lot of sentence problems, run-ons, specifically."

Student #3: Brian was an 18 year-old, traditional student who enrolled in SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II. The faculty rated his essay with a moderate score; a 4. Brian's placement essay started out with a more relaxed style in comparison to other students. He opens his essay, "Well, trying to chose on a class which is best suited for me has been somewhat difficult at first have realized that composition I surprisingly to me seems to be the best fit for me because I do consider myself as a good writer, but not great." Throughout his essay he did use supportive reasons to further justify his decision.

Even though he preferred to take CM: 113T Composition I, his survey at 6 weeks stated he was very satisfied (rating 5) with his course placement. He felt over-prepared for the assignments as they were easy. He expected to achieve an "A" in the course. At 15 weeks, Brian felt he was undecided (rating 3) about his satisfaction with his course placement as he felt over-prepared for the course. His professor was very satisfied (rating 5) with his course placement as "he had some minor corrections that needed to be done." He was "really good at structure as far as paragraphing. He knew how an essay was supposed to be set up (with an) introduction, conclusion, and the body where you support it." He needed "a little help with the actual structure of the paragraphs as far as a general sentence followed by specific examples."

Student #4: Kathy was 18 years-old, traditional age, and enrolled in SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II. Her COMPASS score, 22, barely placed her in SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I. Kathy's essay received a moderate rating; a 3. She also indicated in her placement essay she preferred to take SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I. Her essay identified that she "has good work skills, flowing topics, and using my grammar and punctuation correctly." Kathy stated one weakness that she had difficulty "narrowing a specific topic."

Her survey responses at 6 weeks indicated she was very satisfied (rating 5) with her placement, felt adequately prepared for the assignments that were within her capabilities, and expected to earn an "A" in the course. At 15 weeks, she made one slight adjustment to her responses. She felt after six weeks she was somewhat prepared for the assignments in the course. Her professor felt satisfied (rating 4) with her course placement. I quote, "Kathy's did very well. She has worked very hard. I think it has been a little bit of a challenge for her."

Inappropriate placement. One student was inappropriately placed into his course using her essay rating. Inappropriate placement was defined as the faculty perception that the student had inadequate or too advanced writing skills inconsistent with the demands of the course. A description of the placement follows:

Student #5: Kari was an 18 year-old, traditional age student who enrolled in SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II. Her COMPASS score of 15 was extremely low for this course. Kari's essay received a moderate rating; a 4. In her essay she revealed her preferred course placement was CM: 113T Composition I as she wanted to take a

transfer level course. But it was clear her writing ability was not appropriate for a standard level course. Within her essay she was not very focused on the topic and did not have a defined introduction, body, or conclusion. She also stated writing was not one of her favorite subjects, but she knew writing was important. Kari wrote, "Writing essays and stuff like that gets to me, but I manage to do a good job no matters about it."

At 6 weeks into her SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II course, she indicated on her survey she was satisfied (rating 4) with her placement. She was somewhat prepared for the assignments, but found them easy. At 6 weeks she expected to earn a "B" in the course. Nine weeks later she adjusted each survey response. Kari was very satisfied (rating 5), felt adequately prepared for the assignments, the assignments were within her abilities, and expected to earn an "A" in the course. Her professor was dissatisfied (rating 2) with her course placement. She indicated Kari was "quite an immature writer and needed a lot of help with her work." Her professor also stated she "worked hard and I could tell that she had people outside of the class (Academic Support Area) help her too. Kari could have profited from the Fundamentals of Writing I class, I think."

### COMPASS

Four students in this independent analysis selected their courses solely based on their COMPASS test scores.

Appropriate placement. Three students were appropriately placed into their courses using only their test score. Appropriate placement was defined as the faculty

perception that the student had adequate writing skills consistent with the demands of the course. A description of each placement follows:

Student #1: Mel was a 19 year-old, traditional student who enrolled in Composition I based on his score on the COMPASS test, which was the highest score possible; a 99. His essay received a low rating; a 2. This placement essay consisted of five sentences in three paragraphs. At the time of composing his essay, Mel preferred to be placed in Fundamentals of Writing I as he considered himself to be a “bad writer.” He also noted he has a “good understanding of the English language and writing mechanics, but it’s difficult for me to say something clearly.” Within his essay he had a weak thesis and topic statements, but his punctuation was accurate.

Mel indicated in his survey at 6 weeks that he was satisfied (rating 4) with his course placement and involvement in the placement process. At 15 weeks, Mel was very satisfied (rating 5) with his placement. He felt adequately prepared for the assignments at both points in time. However, at 15 weeks he felt the assignments were easy in comparison to being within his capabilities at 6 weeks into the semester. Throughout the course he expected to achieve a grade of B for the course. His professor was also satisfied (rating 4) with his course placement at 15 weeks into the semester. She indicated, “I couldn’t see him in Funds. (Fundamentals of Writing I or II), but he does have more problems than the other students in the class. Not big enough to be in developmental writing, by any means.”

Student #2: Andrew was a traditional age student of 18 years. He changed his original course selection and self-selected CM: 113T Composition I based on his

COMPASS scores; a 69. His essay and initial preference suggested he should schedule for SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II. His essay received a moderate rating; a 4. In his essay he wrote, "The English credit I received my Senior year gave me no practice on composition skills such as grammar, confidence in writing ability, and punctuation. In fact out of the two semesters I never had any written essays at all. What I'm trying to get across is that I think it would be a good idea for me to brush up on my writing skills." In his conclusion he also shared, "I might need to get back a confident state with my writing abilities. I have never really felt strong at all in writing or reading, however I believe I have some characteristics that would make me a good writer."

At 6 weeks into the course, Andrew felt somewhat prepared for his composition course. Throughout the semester he felt satisfied (rating 4) with his placement and felt the assignments were within his capabilities to achieve an "A." His professor was very satisfied (rating 5) with his placement. She indicated, "He's real articulate. He writes with good style too. Awesome instincts."

Student #3: Jerry was a traditional college student at the age of 19. He enrolled into CM: 113T Composition I based on his COMPASS score, a 79. The faculty readers indicated his essay placed him into SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II as supported by his moderate rating; a 4. Within his essay he expressed that he preferred to enroll in SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I as he "struggled on research papers, essays, and many other writing classes in high school." His course selection was based on his need "to learn more on the rules of punctuation and citations."

Jerry reported on his survey that he was satisfied (rating 4) on his course placement at 6 and 15 weeks. He felt very prepared for the assignments. At six weeks he indicated the assignments were within his capabilities and his perception at 15 weeks indicated the assignments were easy. His professor was very satisfied (rating 5) with his course placement. She stated, "What he turns in is solid."

Inappropriate placement. One student was inappropriately placed in his course using his COMPASS score. Inappropriate placement was defined as the faculty perception that the student had inadequate or too advanced writing skills inconsistent with the demands of the course. A description of the placement follows:

Student #4: Bob was an 18 year-old, traditional student enrolled in SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I based solely on his COMPASS score; a 33. Not sure of the exact reason, perhaps he was misinformed, Bob scheduled for a developmental writing course even though his essay rating and preferred course placement indicated he was most suitable for CM:113T Composition I. His essay was quite strong as identified by his high essay rating; a 5. He clearly composed an introduction, body, and conclusion. In addition, he used topic statements to defend his thesis of selecting composition I as his preferred course placement. He indicated he used EBSCOHOST and MLA/APA writing styles in high school. Bob also desired a challenge as he wrote, "I feel this class (Composition I) will challenge me to get better at what I already know and teach me new and better things in writing."

In the placement surveys, Bob indicated he was undecided (rating 3) about his placement. He felt over-prepared for the assignments as they were too easy. He also

indicated he expected to earn a grade of A. On the survey he did indicate his dissatisfaction with his involvement in the writing course placement decision. Bob's professor expressed that she was dissatisfied (rating 2) with his placement. She stated, "His writing was very very good. He had very little problems with sentence structure, fragments, and punctuation." In addition he had "no problem with content generating material as he didn't turn in a paper less than the required length."

### Summary

The five sections in this chapter addressed what indicators, separately or in combination, resulted in an appropriate or inappropriate writing course placement. In regards to the over-arching research question, the results support the use of multiple measures for course placement as there was not a single indicator (COMPASS, essay, or student preference) that clearly predicted a successful student placement. Within this analysis, all 9 students were appropriately placed into their writing course (SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I, SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II, or CM: 113T Composition I) using all three indicators. Any combination of two placement indicators should also result in an appropriate course placement. Eighteen students within this analysis were also appropriately placed using at least two placement indicators. Only one student, Wanda, was identified by faculty as being inappropriately placed using two indicators. Her writing skills were too advanced for the demands of the course. However, Wanda preferred a lower level course as she was not confident with her writing ability. The student course placement recommendations indicated agreement among all three placement indicators comprised of 36 out of 108 (33.3%) of



the students in this study, while agreement between at least two of the three indicators comprised of 98 out of 108 (90.8%) of the students. The majority of the students (97.4%) selected their courses based on their placement recommendations.

The students and faculty expressed their satisfaction with the placement model. Overall, the surveys results identified the majority of the students (85.2% at 6 weeks; 89.1% at 15 weeks) were satisfied to very satisfied with their course placement at two points in the semester. A moderate relationship existed between the students' satisfaction ratings,  $p < .01$ ;  $r(59) = .524$ . In addition, the majority of the students (92.0% at 6 weeks; 96.9% students at 15 weeks) perceived the assignments for the course to be at least within their abilities. All of the students who completed the surveys, expected to earn a grade of C or higher. The faculty participating in the independent analysis rated their satisfaction with the student's course placement. The majority of the students (85.7%) were either in agreement or indicated an adjacent rating with their instructors. The students and faculty were satisfied with the placement model.

Regarding the sub-research questions, to what extent did the COMPASS test result in an appropriate or inappropriate course placement? The COMPASS test was used as the sole placement indicator for 4 students in the independent analysis; 3 students were appropriately placed into their courses. One student, Bob, who was inappropriately placed using his COMPASS score, appeared to have been misinformed. His preference and essay rating indicated he preferred to take CM: 113T Composition I. The exact reason for this inappropriate placement was unknown. There was the

possibility he was misadvised, scheduled before his essay was rated, or simply his placement form got lost. On his survey, he indicated he was dissatisfied with his involvement with the writing course placement. Even though this independent sample was relatively small, the standardized test appears to be fairly reliable. One faculty stated the COMPASS test “does an adequate job, but it may not be a 100% efficient.” The COMPASS test favored well in combination with the other indicators as revealed by the student and faculty satisfaction with their course placement. Another faculty member stated “I like what we are doing now (both assessments) with having writing in addition to just the COMPASS test.”

To what extent did the essay result in an appropriate or inappropriate course placement? Five students used their essay rating as a sole indicator for their placement; 4 students were appropriately placed. One student, Kari, who was inappropriately placed using her essay rating, “was quite an immature writer.” She needed a lot of work on her sentence structures and organization. Her professor also stated she “worked hard” in her course. In Kari’s essay she revealed her motivation to succeed as she’d “manage to do a good job.” This diagnostic tool allowed students to have a “voice” in their course placement, in addition to unveiling non-cognitive factors that impacted the placement decision. The revealed patterns or themes that emerged from the student essays suggest there are other factors to consider when making the course placement decision, especially if a student’s placement score falls in the decision zone. These essays suggest that level of confidence, motivation, and prior work experience should impact student placement. The essays also fared well in combination with the other

placement indicators as previously indicated by the student and faculty satisfaction measures.

To what extent did a student's preference result in an appropriate or inappropriate course placement? Using student's preference as an independent measure of course placement was not allowed for this study; however, student involvement in the course placement decision might have been an important factor to motivate students to be successful. The results of this study suggested several students valued their involvement as revealed in the essays. One student wrote, "Thank you for understanding why Fundamentals of Writing II is for me and for allowing me to write to you." In addition, 67 out of 88 (76.1%) were satisfied with their involvement in their course placement decision. In order to protect these students from the possibility of an inaccurate self-placement, students were required to select their writing course based on their COMPASS test score or essay rating. Ten students were initially identified as not agreeing with either assessment recommendation. Of these students, 9 out of 10 (90%) were satisfied or very satisfied with their final course placement decision.

In Chapter 5, the results from this inquiry are further discussed, linked to the literature, and the implications for future placement practices were identified.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Data indicated the use of multiple placement measures resulted in an appropriate course placement. A single indicator (COMPASS, essay, or student preference) could not successfully predict the writing placement for every student participating in the study. The accumulation of placement data within the independent analysis indicated agreement among all three indicators would result in an appropriate course placement. However, college administrators and faculty cannot expect agreement among all three indicators for every student (Table 3). In addition, any combination of two placement indicators should also result in an appropriate course placement. The COMPASS test and essay, as single indicators, appeared to be fairly reliable as individual assessments, even though the sample size in the independent analysis was relatively small.

Writing course placement has proven to be complex as revealed by this study. Both cognitive and non-cognitive factors influence a student's placement decision. Technical writing ability was certainly the most important factor in course placement. However, students who scored in the decision zone might have perceived an inappropriate placement based on other factors such as confidence in writing, student motivation, and work experiences if these factors were not taken into consideration or discussed when scheduling for courses. For example: If a student scored 2 points short on the COMPASS test (decision zone), the essay score might have placed the student slightly higher and acknowledged motivation to succeed. During the advising session,

the advisor should have further discussed the placement to help the student self-select his writing course.

Discussion in this chapter focused on appropriate course placement using multiple measures as supported by the student and faculty satisfaction with the “directed self-placement” model. In addition, this discussion explored the impact of non-cognitive factors and the possible differences between non-traditional and traditional learners. Even though the sample size of non-traditional students from this study was too small ( $n=22$ ) to make generalizations about adult learning theory, some theoretical underpinnings were worth mentioning. All of these areas support the efficacy of this course placement model. However, some of these findings only begin the research in “directed self-placement.” In addition, there are implications for faculty and administrators to consider for future practice and research.

### Appropriate Placement

#### Use of Multiple Measures

Course placement data indicated a single indicator (COMPASS, essay, or student preference) could not successfully predict the writing course placement for every student participating in the study. The independent analysis showed agreement among all three placement indicators resulted in an appropriate course placement. These students were expected to adequately meet the demands of the course. In addition, any combination of two placement indicators should also result in an appropriate course placement. The majority of the students (97.4%) selected their courses based on their placement recommendation. Approximately 91% of the students

were recommended to select their courses with at least two of the three placement indicators in agreement; however, agreement among these indicators varied. The remaining 9% of the students indicated they preferred taking a course that was not recommended by their COMPASS test or essay.

There are two possible reasons for the varied agreement among the placement indicators (Table 3). These reasons support the use of multiple assessments for course selection. First of all, this variance suggested some community college students performed differently on standardized tests in comparison to a diagnostic writing sample. White (1998) recommended supplementing multiple choice tests with an essay format in order to eliminate potential testing bias. In addition, some students' writing test scores were not related to their actual writing ability (White, 1998). This notion was also supported by the institution's faculty as indicated by the comments of two faculty members, "I like what we are doing now (both assessments) with having writing in addition to just the COMPASS test." Another faculty member stated, "The COMPASS test 'does an adequate job, but it may not be a 100% efficient.'"

Second, some of this variance was related to the fact a few students were unable to accurately select a course based on their initial perceptions of their writing ability. While only 3 students (1.5%) wrote an essay that was off topic, there were 10 students (9% of the sample) who were not in agreement with either indicator (COMPASS or essay). Some of these students might have been unaware of their writing ability or misunderstood the writing prompt. English as a Second Language (ESL) or special needs students on occasion had difficulty interpreting the directions. Of these students

who were not in agreement with another indicator, the majority of them (90%) were satisfied or very satisfied with their final course placement decision. This outcome suggested the possibility of an inaccurate initial self-evaluation or misinterpretation of the directions as they were satisfied or in agreement with their final course placement decision.

The majority of the faculty and students were satisfied using the “directed self-placement” model. The model does predict appropriate student course placement if there was agreement with at least two placement indicators. The faculty identified all of the students who used at least two placement indicators as appropriately placed with the exception of Wanda. Wanda was not confident with her writing ability and self-selected a lower level writing course, SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I, to build her confidence. Her professor stated, “If she (Wanda) would have been given choice, I’m sure that she would have stayed in Fundamentals of Writing I because of her little confidence in her writing. She is much better than she gives herself credit for.”

The student survey results indicated the majority (85.2% at 6 weeks and 89.1% at 15 weeks) were very satisfied or satisfied with their course placement. To further articulate their satisfaction, most of them felt the assignments were at least within their capabilities (92% at 6 weeks and 96.9% at 15 weeks) and expected to achieve a grade of C or higher at both points in the semester. This data indicated most of the students were content with their self-selection based on the placement recommendations and felt appropriately placed. The congruency of the survey results showed consistency in their individual responses. In addition, a moderate relationship existed between the

student's satisfaction ratings at 6 and 15 weeks in the semester;  $r(59) = .524, p < .01$ .

The satisfaction measures supported the use of multiple measures to assess student course placement.

### Non-Cognitive Factors

Students who expressed non-cognitive factors, such as confidence, motivation, and related work experiences, in their essays might have been influenced to select a specific course based on that self-perception. In addition, there appeared to be a relationship between level of confidence and work experiences. This study identified students who used non-cognitive factors in their decision making.

Level of confidence. According to the faculty, Wanda was inappropriately placed into her SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I course based on her writing ability. She had little to no confidence in her writing ability and preferred to start at the lowest possible level. In her essay, she stated it was in her best interest to take this course as she "wasn't comfortable" with her writing abilities. She scheduled for SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I based her COMPASS test score and her personal preference. While she might have been successful in SC: 017D Fundamentals of Writing II, as stated by her instructor, she might not have built the same level of confidence in herself if she had taken a more challenging course. So in this student's eyes she considered herself appropriately placed into her writing course.

Self-efficacy was a powerful placement tool. Pajares (2003, p. 140) stated "According to Bandura, how people behave can often be better predicted by the beliefs they hold about their capabilities, what he called self-efficacy beliefs, than by what they



are actually capable of accomplishing, for these self-perceptions help determine what individuals do with the knowledge and skills they have.” Blakesley, et al., (2003) indicated students who were more efficacious were more apt to pass their courses.

In this study, the students who were more confident and more meta-cognitively aware of their writing ability were able to articulate elements of the writing process in their essays and how they acquired this knowledge. These students typically selected CM: 113T Composition I as their preferred course placement. Students with high self-efficacy portray more confidence in their actual writing ability and were more apt to select a challenge than students who were less confident and avoided difficult tasks. Students who identified themselves in their essays as “average” had some meta-cognitive awareness of the writing process, but they did not articulate these elements as clearly. Students with low self-efficacy were more likely to take lower level courses to build their confidence and writing ability.

The majority of the students (92% at 6 weeks and 96.6% at 15 weeks) who participated in this study believed the assignments were at least within their capabilities. Therefore, these students possessed the confidence to use their writing abilities to be successful in their courses. “Directed self-placement” guided students in their course placement and required them to be accountable for their placement decision. If students were in the decision zone, they could be given a choice to self-select their courses as shown by the results from this study.

Student motivation. Empowering students to take ownership in their course placement decision can motivate them to succeed or, at a minimum hold, them

accountable for their decision (Royer & Gilles, 2003). The independent analysis of selected students revealed Kari, one of the students perceived by faculty as being inappropriately placed, was influenced by her internal desire for success. Kari was motivated to take a transfer level course even though she expressed in her essay an average level of confidence. She wrote, "Writing essays and stuff like that gets to me, but I manage to do a good job no matters about it."

Kari was inappropriately placed based on her writing abilities; however she had the desire to seek assistance both inside and outside of the classroom to be successful in the course. In her essay she touched on her motivation. The assignments may have been slightly outside of her "zone of proximal development," but they were within her reach with the use of the support services on campus and a supportive faculty member. Her survey responses at 15 weeks suggested that she was adequately prepared for the class, the assignments were within her capabilities, and she expected to earn an "A" in the course. From a constructivist point of view, an argument could be made that since Kari was capable of completing the assignments within her "zone of proximal development" her placement was appropriate. The "zone of proximal development" was expanded by other affective factors embedded in the learning process. Wells (1999, p.331) postulated that "learning in the zone of proximal development involves all aspects of the learner – acting, thinking, and feeling."

Work experiences. Several students shared their work experiences or lack of training and how this knowledge impacted their course placement decision. Writing skills acquired in the workplace had relevance to course placement just as those

developed while in high school. The majority of the students who articulated their work experiences were non-traditional students. Some of these students shared how they used their high school education in the workforce to justify their course selection. Others suggested they might need a “refresher course” as their work experience did not require them to use their writing abilities. These experiences appeared to be related to their level of confidence in their writing ability. Students who acquired writing experience in the workforce, such as writing an employee newsletter, were more confident in their writing ability. Students who needed a “refresher course” were not as confident and typically selected a lower level course.

The self-directed essay allowed for cognitive and non-cognitive factors to be communicated to the faculty so they had a better understanding of student’s prior knowledge, skills, and experiences. Many variables in course placement are secondary to writing ability but still had relevance to the decision, especially if students were in the decision zone.

The “directed self-placement” model, in particular the self-directed writing prompt, provided evidence of students’ writing abilities and allowed students to communicate their preferred course placement. As placement specialists, advisors, counselors, and faculty, one of our roles was to use multiple assessments to help students select courses that are within their developmental abilities and which will further develop their meta-cognitive processes.

### Traditional and Non-Traditional Students

Even though the sample size of non-traditional students from this study was too small (n=22) to make generalizations about adult learning theory, some key underpinnings were worth mentioning to distinguish traditional and non-traditional students. Non-traditional age students were defined as students over the age of 24 years and who typically had different life circumstances in comparison to a traditional student.

The two pillars of adult learning theory, “andragogy and self-directed learning,” seemed to characterize the non-traditional learners in this study (Merriam, 2001, p. 5). During the faculty interviews, several statements supported the perception that these non-traditional learners were self-directed, goal-oriented, internally motivated, and shared their life experiences. Natalie, “the poster child, was problematically unable to come to class, but worked very hard to catch up.” Lenny “interestingly had perfect attendance” which made “a difference in completing assignments.” In addition, Lenny’s “ability to produce good ideas based on his experiences was tremendous.” “Chuck’s note taking skills and level of conscientiousness were excellent.... as was his perfect attendance.” Raymond was a “leader.”

The independent analysis identified some consistent findings among the non-traditional students. Five of the 6 non-traditional students were very satisfied with their course placement and expected to achieve an “A” in their writing course as indicated by their course placement surveys. These students ranged in age from 26 to 43 years old and were enrolled in all levels of the writing courses; Fundamentals of Writing I,

Fundamentals of Writing II, and Composition I. The only non-traditional student who did not rate her satisfaction quite as high was Natalie. She was satisfied with her placement and expected to achieve a “C” in the course. Based on her instructor’s comments, Natalie was a “poster child.” She was a dedicated student who “worked very hard” to catch up after being absent from class. This quote indicated Natalie had the internal motivation to succeed even after her set backs.

Faculty made it known during the interviews when they were speaking specifically about a non-traditional student. They frequently provided examples to support their different life circumstances in comparison to a traditional student. For the traditional age students, most of the faculty spoke of only their writing ability. The traditional age students also had more disparity in their satisfaction ratings at 6 and 15 weeks. In the independent analysis, the majority of the traditional age students (86.3%) were satisfied or highly satisfied with their course placement, but a few students were undecided and one student dissatisfied. Considering this sample was too small to generate any theoretical conclusions to support adult learning theory, further investigation of the differences between traditional and non-traditional students is recommended.

### Implications

A self-directed essay gave faculty a diagnostic means to assess students’ writing abilities in addition to promoting self-assessment, student responsibility, and appropriate placement. Although there were several positive outcomes to support the use of this placement practice, there are a few implications for faculty and

administrators to consider before implementing this model, or an adapted version, college-wide. They include: revised admissions policies, financial commitment, allegiance to state and federal mandates, and future research.

#### Admissions Policies

While this College does not have mandatory placement, several of the technical programs required students to have minimum scores on the COMPASS test before they were fully accepted into the program. A few of these programs had long waiting lists and before students were allowed on the list they must have satisfied the admissions requirement. So if a student scored in the SC: 015D Fundamentals of Writing I, the lowest level, the student must prove academic readiness to be placed on the waiting list by successfully completing a year of remedial education.

If multiple writing assessments were given to students, the faculty members in these technical programs would have to adjust their admissions criteria. Adjusting admissions criteria to accept either a minimum COMPASS score or essay rating would require one contact with each department chair to receive a written statement of departmental approval. This recommended policy supports the findings in this study.

#### Financial Commitment

There must be a financial commitment from the institution in order to use the “directed-self placement” model due to the costs associated with administering a writing sample. The researcher and numerous English faculty members believe a supplemental writing sample should be collected prior to a student’s registration. When faculty members gave a supplemental writing sample on the first day of class, it

disrupted some student's lives as they were given the option of changing their writing courses on the second day of class. Some fortunate students slipped into another section scheduled at the same time, while others chose another time or a non-writing course due to the limited course availability. In addition, the faculty time to administer the essay and adjust students' schedules detracted from the primary academic purpose, to facilitate learning.

One option would be to require all students to complete a writing sample, preferably using the self-directed writing prompt, prior to scheduling for their classes. With the addition of the ACT writing test in spring 2005, the students who take the ACT test could complete the writing portion as well. Several Iowa colleges are recommending the writing test, but thus far most Iowa colleges are waiting a year before deciding to require the test.

A second option would be to give students a choice to complete a writing sample after the completion of the COMPASS test. If students were not in agreement with their COMPASS writing test score or they placed in the decision zone, they could be administered the self-directed writing prompt through the placement office.

Administering a writing sample at the placement office would require a part-time assistant and faculty readers. The reading sessions would need to occur once a week with three faculty receiving one hour of release time. The amount of release time may vary depending on the quantity of the essays. This research project has proven an essay was a viable alternative to provide better diagnostic insight. In addition, this

method of administration would allow the faculty to teach their students during the first week of their courses.

### State and Federal Mandates

Since community colleges have the option of allowing students to enroll without completing their high school diploma or equivalent, must adhere to state and federal mandates. The Department of Education, under section 484(d) of the Higher Education Act of 1965, regulated the Ability to Benefit (ATB) tests which allow higher education institutions to select approved tests to be administered to students who have not completed a high school diploma or GED equivalency but who seeking federal financial assistance (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The Iowa Department of Education, Chapter 21 (260C) states that Iowa community colleges need to provide placement services to address the needs and expectations of students (Iowa Administrative Code, 2003).

Knowing that this College allows students to enroll in some courses even though they have not completed their high school degree, means the College is required to use an approved test, such as the COMPASS test, to place those students if they receive financial aid. According to the “ability to benefit” regulations, students must take the test in one sitting and use the entire battery of scores (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). After the student completed the high school graduation requirements or the equivalent, then the self-directed essay results could be considered for course placement.



### Future Research

Future studies using the “directed self-placement” model within the community college are recommended. The impact of faculty involvement in the placement process was not measured in this study. Several questions could guide this future inquiry. To what extent did the faculty’s involvement in a student’s course placement effect student participation in the course? Specifically, did the student course placement surveys at 6 and 15 weeks or the possibility of the faculty participating in an interview about their placement influence student participation in the writing course? An extension of this study could include an in-depth interview with students about their perceptions of faculty involvement.

A study focusing on the relationship between student involvement and course placement in the community college using this “directed self-placement” model could increase retention. Seventeen students expressed their gratitude for being involved in their placement decision, but it is unknown how this involvement was related to the results or if there was a difference between traditional and non-traditional learners. A longitudinal study focusing on the efficacy of learner participation in writing course placement and the effects on student retention in the community college could add significantly to the body of knowledge. An investigation over a three-year period could reveal higher retention rates in comparison to students placed into their courses without the benefit of the “directed self-placement” model. A post facto design would allow all current students to have the benefit of “directed self-placement” if already fully implemented into the College’s placement practices.

Another study should investigate the students' lack of agreement or change of perceptions with the COMPASS test or self-directed essay as identified in Table 3 of this study. Some of the lack of agreement could simply be a result of a COMPASS testing error. Less than 1% of the students decided to retake the COMPASS test; a much lower response than usual. The college policy allows for one retest and the students always use their highest score for course placement. Some students simply do not spend enough time looking for the errors to edit in the COMPASS test. Since the computerized test is adaptive based on one's ability, students will score considerably lower if they overlook correcting the errors. If students' essay ratings were higher than their COMPASS scores and they were content with the outcome, there was not a reason to retest COMPASS. The possibility of testing error could impact student perception of the COMPASS test and agreement among all three placement indicators (COMPASS test, essay, and student preference). In addition, there might be other factors that influence their initial perceptions.

A final study could incorporate elements of this placement philosophy into other curricular areas. Several college and university faculty members use writing across the curriculum. Incorporating the self-directed placement model into other subjects might expand its use and further add to the body of knowledge.

### Summary

The placement in courses was a critical component in beginning one's program of study. Improper placement could result in negative consequences for the student and the institution. Students might achieve poor grades and be placed on academic

probation, compounding the institution's continual battle with low retention rates and dissatisfied students and faculty. The results supported the use of multiple measures for course placement as there was not a single indicator (COMPASS, essay, or student preference) that clearly predicted a successful student placement. The independent analysis indicated agreement among all three placement indicators resulted in an appropriate course placement. Any combination of two placement indicators should also result in an appropriate course placement. Standardized tests or an independent writing sample provided a "good sort" for initial placement, but they were not sufficiently reliable for all students. Students and faculty both indicated their satisfaction with using multiple measures for course placement. Course placement that focused on this "directed self-placement" model supported the use of multiple assessments, allowed students to have a "voice" in the placement decision, promoted self-evaluation and responsibility, took into consideration non-cognitive factors and had instructional value. Future research studies using this "directed self-placement" model or an adapted version would continue to add to the body of knowledge.

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## APPENDIX A

## Writing Prompt

**Read** the course descriptions and checklists.

**Think** about which course seems the best fit for you – which one matches your current level of experience, confidence, and ability.

**Write** a multi-paragraph essay to the Writing Faculty and explain which course you think would be best for you. To support your decision, describe honestly your strengths as well as the writing areas where you need to improve.

Faculty readers will be interested in your ideas as well as how you present them. They will look for your ability to organize your ideas, to stay focused on your topic, and to competently handle mechanics such as spelling and punctuation.

This is your chance to learn about the writing courses, to think about which one will give you the best chance to succeed, and to convince others to agree with your choice. You must demonstrate writing ability as well as just telling the readers which class you think is best for you.

## Writing Course Descriptions

Fundamentals of Writing I is the most basic writing class. You will read short essays which are usually easy for students to understand. In class you will talk about the essays and think about the ideas that you find. You will write about your own experiences and opinions (usually 1-2 pages in length) as you think about the author's words. You will work alone and with others in groups to practice the writing process. As the course goes on, you should find it easier to write, and you should have more confidence that you are clearly saying what you want.

Fundamentals of Writing II is the second course you could take to learn to write better. You will read more essays and short pieces of literature, and they will be written for different reasons. In class you will talk about the ideas in the articles, why you think they were written, and who you think are likely to read these articles. You will think about how you might change some of your own writing depending on who might read it. You will write organized essays about your own experiences (3-4 pages) with topics such as technology and education after you have been inspired by the other readings. You will work alone and with others in groups to practice the writing process. You will try different ways to think of what to say. You will practice revising or rethinking your writing and editing your work for grammar and mechanics. You will summarize an article and begin to learn how to incorporate other writer's ideas into your own. There will be a section in the course about how to avoid plagiarism.

Fundamentals I and II count toward the hours you need to receive financial aid and figure into your grade point average. However, these classes will not count as transfer courses to another college.

Composition I You will read longer, more difficult essays and articles and be expected to understand and analyze them. After you have some background knowledge of a new topic from your reading, you will write several papers, each usually up to five pages long. You will learn in this class how to use the ideas and information from other sources to support your own ideas. You will learn how to summarize, paraphrase, quote and cite other sources, including books, journals, magazines, newspapers, and interviews. You will learn how to use the college library and the databases there (EBSCOHOST) and how to properly cite the sources you use in MLA or AP style. You will continue working on the writing process of getting good ideas, using the best sources, organizing your thoughts, thinking about your audience, rethinking and revising your writing, and editing your work. You should feel more confident at the end of this course that you can write a research paper for any college course at Hawkeye. This course carries transfer credit.

## Writing Course Checklist

SC:015D Fundamentals of Writing I is recommended if most of the following statements best describe you:

- ☐ I only read books, magazines, or newspapers when necessary.
- ☐ In high school I didn't write much.
- ☐ My high school GPA was less than average (below 2.0).
- ☐ I don't understand the rules of grammar and punctuation.
- ☐ I avoided taking writing courses in high school.

SC:017D Fundamentals of Writing II is recommended if most of the following statements best describe you:

- ☐ I read books, magazines, or newspapers fairly regularly (once a week).
- ☐ In high school I wrote papers or essays on occasion.
- ☐ My high school GPA was average (2.0).
- ☐ I could use some review of grammar and punctuation.
- ☐ I consider myself as an average writer.

CM: 113T Composition I is recommended if most of the following statements best describe you:

- ☐ I consider myself to be a strong reader.
- ☐ I read regularly (several times each week).
- ☐ In high school I wrote essays and papers on a regular basis.
- ☐ My high school GPA was above average (above a 2.5).
- ☐ I am comfortable with my ability to write grammatical sentences.
- ☐ I consider myself as a fairly strong writer.

(Royer & Gilles, 1998)

## APPENDIX B

## Rubrics

Score	Description
1	The essay reflects some characteristics of a Level 2 response, but it is of slightly poorer quality.
2	Shows difficulty in making sense with written words; sentences are awkward, unclear or not grammatically appropriate for English. Does not focus on the topic. Does not have a controlling purpose or idea. Gives vague or general assertions but few specifics. Does not seem to have a clear audience in mind. Slang, profanity, or overly conversational tones detracts from meaning. Tells only facts, but does not “show” the author’s real attitude. Lack depth, specificity, or originality. Has little sense of organizational control; does not have a beginning, middle, or end. Is all one or two paragraphs, showing little understanding or organizing. Mechanical errors are frequent and distracting. Little material is generated. In appropriate repetition that distracts the reader.
3	The essay reflects slight improvements on some of the characteristics of a Level 2 response.
4	The essay reflects some characteristics of a Level 5 response, but it is of poorer quality.
5	Shows fluency in writing clear English. Focuses on the topic as directed by the prompt. Shows a clear attitude toward the situation. Gives specific details to explain the ideas. Gives clear reasons to support their position. Has evidence of a clear audience in mind. Uses appropriate tone and level of formality. Goes beyond facts to include feelings about the situation. Shows the ability to generate material. Shows original insight or depth of thought. The writing has a beginning, middle, and end. The paper shows adequate paragraphing structure. The sentences are generally clear. There is control of grammar, punctuation, spelling so that it does not distract from the meaning.
6	The essay reflects the majority of the characteristics of a level 5 response with proficient competency.

## APPENDIX C

Student Placement Survey  
September 2004

Course Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth (MM/DD/YYYY): \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer each question below by selecting one answer that most reflects your placement in this course. This information will be kept confidential and will not affect your grade or other activities related to this course. Thank you for your assistance in providing insight about your course placement.

1. Is this your first writing course at this college?

☐ YES☐ NO

2. Did you take the COMPASS placement test?

☐ YES☐ NO3. Did you complete a writing sample **before** you scheduled for your writing course?☐ YES☐ NO

4. How satisfied are you with your writing course placement?

☐ Very satisfied☐ Satisfied☐ Undecided☐ Dissatisfied☐ Very dissatisfied

5. How prepared were you for the assignments in this course?

☐ Not prepared☐ Somewhat prepared☐ Adequately prepared☐ Very prepared☐ Over-prepared



6. Do you find the assignments in this course to be:

- ☐ Too difficult
- ☐ Difficult
- ☐ Within your capabilities
- ☐ Easy
- ☐ Too easy

7. At this time what grade do you expect to earn in this course?

- ☐ A
- ☐ B
- ☐ C
- ☐ D
- ☐ F

8. Were you satisfied with **your involvement** in the writing course placement decision?

- ☐ Very satisfied
- ☐ Satisfied
- ☐ Undecided
- ☐ Dissatisfied
- ☐ Very dissatisfied

Thanks for completing this survey.

Student Placement Survey  
December 2004

Course Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth (MM/DD/YYYY): \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer each question below by selecting one answer that most reflects your placement in this course. This information will be kept confidential and will not affect your grade or other activities related to this course. Thank you for your assistance in providing insight about your course placement.

1. How satisfied are you with your writing course placement?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Very satisfied
- \_\_\_\_\_ Satisfied
- \_\_\_\_\_ Undecided
- \_\_\_\_\_ Dissatisfied
- \_\_\_\_\_ Very dissatisfied

2. How prepared were you for the assignments in this course?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Not prepared
- \_\_\_\_\_ Somewhat prepared
- \_\_\_\_\_ Adequately prepared
- \_\_\_\_\_ Very prepared
- \_\_\_\_\_ Over-prepared

3. Did you find the assignments in this course to be:

- \_\_\_\_\_ Too difficult
- \_\_\_\_\_ Difficult
- \_\_\_\_\_ Within your capabilities
- \_\_\_\_\_ Easy
- \_\_\_\_\_ Too easy

4. What grade do you expect to earn in this course?

- \_\_\_\_\_ A
- \_\_\_\_\_ B
- \_\_\_\_\_ C
- \_\_\_\_\_ D
- \_\_\_\_\_ F

Thanks for completing this survey.

## APPENDIX D

## Faculty Interview Questions

December 2004

1. How many years have you taught writing courses at (name of college)?
2. Which writing courses have you taught at (name of college)?
3. Of the students who participated in this study, which students were appropriately placed into your course based on their writing ability? Please refer to your satisfaction rating form (Rating Scores 4 & 5). Why do you feel that they were appropriately placed into your writing course? Can you cite an example from their portfolio or final paper to support your decision?
4. Of the students who participated in this study, which students weren't appropriately placed into your course based on their writing ability? Please refer to your satisfaction rating form (Rating Scores 1 & 2). Why do you feel that they were not appropriately placed into your writing course? Can you cite an example from their portfolio or final paper to support your decision?
5. Of the students who participated in the project, did any of them share with you their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their course placement? Did you receive any complaints?
6. Do you have any recommendations to improve the existing writing course placement practices at Hawkeye Community College?
7. Is there anything else that you'd like to share?

## APPENDIX E

## Self-Directed Student Course Placement Satisfaction Rating Form

Course: \_\_\_\_\_ Section Number: \_\_\_\_\_

How satisfied were you with the placement of these students in your writing course based on their writing ability? Please rate each student using the following criteria:

Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Undecided	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
5	4	3	2	1

[illegible]